

Human Rights Campaign Foundation Religion & Faith Program

“FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO”

FILM DISCUSSION GUIDE & TOOLKIT



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“FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO”

FILM INITIAL DISCUSSION GUIDE

FOR LEADERS:

Begin by giving participants space to reflect on what they've seen. Especially if the discussion is taking place immediately after the film is over, give at least 10-15 minutes for quiet reflection for folks to take in the content and let it soak in. If participants are watching the film in advance of the discussion and there will be hours or days between seeing the film and gathering to discuss it, recommend to participants that they take note of their experiences while watching the film:

- What emotions surfaced for you with the different stories?
- How did your body react to watching the film? Were you tense or anxious? Did you feel at ease or relieved? No reaction is wrong. How we react physically to art helps us navigate what is happening for us on an emotional and spiritual level — take note of it and ask questions of it. Some examples: If you feel inflammation or anger in your body, ask where that's coming from. If you feel anxious or jittery, ask why that response is coming up for you. Thank you body for helping you to understand the experience of watching the film, and continue to take note of it as you engage in communal discussion.
- What questions come up for you? Is there something you wanted more of? Is there something that was unclear or uncomfortable? Take note of what questions linger with you after watching the film.

When you gather, either in person or virtually, establish a space that is welcoming and respectful. Set community guidelines for the discussion to ensure that everyone's voice can be heard, but also that everyone feels as safe and comfortable as possible with difficult conversations. The following questions are simply guiding questions. The most important questions are going to be the ones that rise up out of your particular community. Hold the tension and complexity of this conversation with tenderness and grace, and invite participants to do the same for one another. This conversation is not intended to be an academic discourse or a debate. It is a communal conversation that should help to guide your community to be a more understanding and inclusive space.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What were your initial reactions to the film?
- Where do you see yourself in the film?
- The stories in the film show a tension between self acceptance and self denial? Take a moment to reflect on your own experiences of self acceptance and self denial. What was that process like for you? Do you hope that things would have been different for you? What do you hope that process could look like for others?
- The film also tells stories of how we accept or exclude others based on differences. How have you either experienced rejection based on difference or otherness, or are there examples of how you have excluded others based on difference or otherness?
- As the film shows us, inclusion and exclusion is often a matter of life and death. What changes can be made in our communities to ensure that no one feels left out.

Give space after the discussion for silent and/or creative reflection as is appropriate for your community. Closing in prayer or liturgy or ritual emphasizes the sacredness of the space and while it doesn't mean the conversations had are now over, it seals them for the time being.

"FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO"

FILM BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

The following Bible study guides are meant to help continue the conversations and expand the dialogue on inclusion and welcome of the LGBTQ community in your particular worshipping community.

STUDY #1: THE LAW SAYS DO NO HARM

Begin with prayer when and where appropriate, and then read through the passage.

Luke 10:25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" **26** He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" **27** He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." **28** And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" **30** Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

In the film, Rev. Dr. Delman Coates says that, "Most people are not trying to be homophobic, most Christians are trying to be faithful to their understanding of scripture." The parable of the good Samaritan is introduced to us because of an inquiring lawyer who wants to know what it means to be faithful to scripture. Jesus here introduces the lawyer, and readers and listeners, to the possibility of a more expansive definition of who our neighbors are, and what it means to love our neighbors by doing no harm and supporting them when in need. The diverse experiences of the LGBTQ community include many stories of being castigated and left to the side of the road to suffer by society at large, but especially by faith communities who, in their attempts to be faithful to their understanding of scripture, end up harming themselves and others.

- What are your initial observations from the text? Does it connect you back to the stories from the film? If so, how?
- Who in the text do you resonate with the most? Who have you been and who do you want to be?
- How do you understand Jesus' teaching on who your neighbor is and how we should treat our neighbor?
- How has your home or your faith community been a space of welcome or exclusion for the LGBTQ community?
- At the end of the passage, Jesus instructs the lawyer to "go and do likewise" referring to how the Samaritan treated the man left on the side of the road to Jericho. How do these instructions resonate with you? What is the invitation to action for you?

STUDY #2: THE SPIRIT SAYS ALL MUST FLOURISH

John 10:1-11

1 "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. **2** The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. **3** The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. **5** They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." **6** Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. **8** All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

The film tells stories of struggle and survival, acceptance and triumph, but also of devastation and loss. The cost of discrimination and exclusion is trauma, suffering, and sometimes death. In John, stories are often presented in contrasts: life or death, light or dark, good and evil. While these binaries are ultimately insufficient for understanding our world, they help provide an ethical framework for how we are to exist in the world: how we treat each other, how we cultivate communities, and how we develop systems for flourishing. Here Jesus positions himself on the other side of the binary from that

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which comes to steal, kill, and destroy. The desire of the Divine is that everyone would flourish, everyone would have their dignity respected and upheld, and all would have abundant life.

- How do your initial impressions of this text take you back to the stories of the film? Where do you see the competing themes of abundant life and the struggle to survive come up in the text? In the film?
- Jesus' parable creates an image of a pasture where all are meant to flourish in the fullness of who they are. How has your home or faith community contributed or taken away from that flourishing? How might a shift towards greater inclusion take place?
- In order to have life abundant, LGBTQ folks need to have the assurance that they will be protected and not discriminated against. It takes the whole of the community working together to ensure that no one is left out and that everyone is taken care of. What commitments can you make in your home, in your faith community, and in your public life to ensure that LGBTQ folks can experience the abundant life Jesus promises?

STUDY #3: A COMMUNITY AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

Acts 6:1-7

1 Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. **2** And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.[a] **3** Therefore, friends,[b] select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, **4** while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." **5** What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. **6** They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The early days of the Church were no different than today. The desire to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God was as present then as it is today. Yet even with a desire for faithfulness, the early Church, much like today, struggled with being true to its calling to be a place for all to experience the radical love and justice of God. This

story of the early Church in Acts is a story of discovering how the community was failing to live up to its calling, and how it addressed the need for transformation. This text is an invitation to us to also consider our call to faithfulness and how our human error is never the end of the story, but always an invitation to growth. The LGBTQ community continues to experience discrimination and exclusion in virtually every area of life. The Church has a mandate not only to be a home that is inclusive for all, but to be a voice for change, challenging the world to be a place that does not discriminate but instead creates just and equitable systems for everyone to flourish.

- How might your home or faith community need to revisit its own practices of inclusion?
- If your home or faith community already is a space of radical love and inclusion, what is the next step for you? How do you invite others to do the same?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources developed by the Human Rights Campaign in Partnership with leading Christian theologians, educators, and pastors are fantastic resources to use for further community conversations in your worship community, families, and with friends. They are robust theological engagements with two of the most fundamental questions individuals and communities ask while trying to better understand and compassionately engage with the experiences of LGBTQ people: "what does the Bible say about homosexuality" and "what does the Bible say about transgender people?". These additional resources can be used as supplements to the film discussion, or as stand alone materials for further discussion.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT “HOMOSEXUALITY”?

INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades, [Pew Research Center](#) has reported that one of the most enduring ethical issues across Christian traditions is sexual diversity. For many Christians, one of the most frequently first-asked questions on this topic is, “What does the Bible say about attraction to someone of the same sex?”

Although it is unlikely that the biblical authors had any notion of sexual orientation (for example, the term homosexual wasn’t even coined until the late 19th century¹) for many people of faith, the Bible is looked to for timeless guidance on what it means to honor God with our lives; and this most certainly includes our sexuality.

Before we can jump into how it is that Christians can maintain the authority of the Bible and also affirm sexual diversity, it might be helpful if we started with a brief but clear overview of some of the assumptions informing many Christian approaches to understanding the Bible.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

For Christians to whom the Bible is God’s very written word, it is widely understood that God produced its contents through inspired human authors to tell the story of God’s creation, how sin entered the world, and the redemption that is found through Jesus Christ and his salvation. In this light, the Bible is often seen as the primary source that helps us figure out how the people of God should live. It is important to point out though that being God’s word doesn’t mean we come to understand what is right or wrong through reading isolated passages. Rather, most Christians make these difficult determinations by studying what the *whole* of Scripture says regarding a specific topic, exploring the linguistic, historical and cultural context within which the words were written, and then putting these discoveries in conversation with what we know to be true of the character of God more broadly. While the book of Hebrews affirms that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever,” our ability to understand and apply the Bible’s teachings changes and deepens as we grow in our faith and learn more about the world.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION?

Whenever any person opens the Bible, they begin a process of interpretation. Individuals attracted to others of the same sex are regularly told they are ‘elevating’ their experience over Scripture when they come to affirming conclusions about their relationships and identities. They are often told this is a direct rejection of the Bible’s authority in their lives. But, the question is begged, is this a fair and accurate assessment? Are there such things as neutral interpretations? Is there one true or correct way to interpret the Bible, and if so, who determines that? The study of biblical interpretation is called hermeneutics, and helps us to address these kinds of questions. Hermeneutics is what we do when we take a text and ask not just “what does this say,” but “what does this mean?” In asking, “What does the Bible say about homosexuality” (or more appropriately stated, “what does the Bible say about attraction to someone of the same sex?”) our task is to explore what the relevant biblical passages on the topic meant in their original context and what they mean for us today. More specifically, we are seeking to determine if the biblical writers were condemning *specific* practices related to sexuality in the ancient world, or were they indeed condemning *all* same-sex relationships of any kind for the rest of time?

TROUBLING THE WATERS OF EXCLUSIONARY INTERPRETATIONS

For many evangelicals and other conservative Christians, the answer to this question is ‘yes’. Their interpretation is that same-sex relationships are not able to reflect God’s creative intent. Their reasoning includes, but is not limited to, 1) what they were always taught was an “unbiased” interpretation of the relevant passages and 2) a core belief that sex differentiation is an indispensable part of Christian marriage. The latter being of tremendous importance, because according to the New Testament, marriage is a primary symbol of the love between Christ and his beloved “bride,” the church. To them, same-sex couples (and single people for that matter) are uniquely excluded from participation in this symbol on the basis of a failure to perform one or more dimensions of an often vague category referred to as ‘gender complementarity.’²

1 While there is evidence same-sex sexuality throughout various ancient civilizations, ranging from dialogues of Plato, such as the *Symposium*, to plays by Aristophanes, and Greek artwork and vases, homosexuality as it pertains to consenting adults and relationships of mutuality were not explored until modernity. For more info see David Halperin’s *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (Routledge, 1990.)

2 While gender complementarity is often treated as an argument within itself, its definition is contested and therefore better understood as a category. For some it is about hierarchy and designating which gender is allowed to hold leadership positions. For others it is about anatomical differences and “how the parts fit.” For others it deals only with procreative potential. It is worth noting that heterosexual couples who does not fit within the bounds of any form of gender complementarity are never susceptible to having their marriage rendered as invalid or unChristian (for example, if they operate as egalitarians or they know they are incapable of bearing children.)

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT “HOMOSEXUALITY”?

While gender complementarity is indeed rooted in passages from Genesis 1 and 2, it is worth noting that these stories say God *began* by creating human beings of male and female sex (defined as the complex result of combinations between chromosomes, gonads, genes, and genitals) but there is nothing that indicates in Scripture that God *only* created this binary.³ This account says little to nothing about gender, (the social and cultural norms and practices corresponding to what is considered masculine and feminine.) Two dimensions of the text that become important in considering the biblical affirmation of intersex, transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse people, [discussed at more length here](#). To further complicate the argument against same-sex relationships, Scripture doesn't suggest that respecting biblical authority means Christians should reject experience as a teacher. In fact, what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount about good trees bearing good fruit and bad trees bearing bad fruit (Matthew 7:17-18) indicates experience should inform how we learn God's truth. This was what allowed the first Christians to decide to include gentiles who were not keeping the Old Testament law in the early church (Acts 15:1-19). It also was the basis for the Christian arguments that put an end to slavery⁴ and has supported movements for women's equality throughout church history as well.⁵

The call to reform Christian teaching in these instances didn't suggest that human experience should be held over Scripture. What they did suggest was that the obvious exclusion, injustice and destructive outcomes of widely held beliefs should take Christians back to the text to consider a different perspective, one which might better reflect the heart of God. While some Christians say that the Bible presents a variety of hard teachings as well as promising suffering for followers of Jesus (Matthew 16:24), it never endorses oppression.⁶ In order for suffering to be Christ-like, it must be redemptive. Redemptive suffering does not uphold oppressive forces but always expresses resistance against them.⁷ For all of these reasons and more, Christians have a moral imperative to reconsider their interpretation of what the Bible says about LGBTQ identities.

SO THEN WHAT ARE THOSE PASSAGES TALKING ABOUT?

While the six passages that address same-sex eroticism in the ancient world are negative about the practices they mention, there is no evidence that these in any way speak to same-sex relationships of love and mutuality. To the contrary, the amount of cultural, historical and linguistic data surrounding how sexuality in the cultures of the biblical authors operated demonstrates that what was being condemned in the Bible is very different than the committed same-sex partnerships we know and see today. The stories of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19) are about sexual violence and the Ancient Near East's stigma toward violating male honor. The injunction that "man must not lie with man" (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13) coheres with the context of a society anxious about their health, continuing family lineages, and retaining the distinctiveness of Israel as a nation. Each time the New Testament addresses the topic in a list of vices (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10), the argument being made is more than likely about the sexual exploitation of young men by older men, a practice called pederasty⁸, and what we read in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is a part of a broader indictment against idolatry and excessive, self-centered lust that is driven by desire to "consume" rather than to love and to serve as outlined for Christian partnership elsewhere in the Bible. While it is likely that Jews and Christians in the 1st century had little to no awareness of a category like [sexual orientation](#), this doesn't mean that the biblical authors were wrong. What it does mean, at a minimum, is that continued opposition toward same-sex relationships and LGBTQ identities must be based on something other than these biblical texts, which brings us back to a theology of Christian marriage or partnership.

3 Genesis 1 & 2 also do not mention God creating marshes, dusk, twilight, estuaries, amphibians or other 'in between's' and yet all of these are seen as a part of God's design. Furthermore, Isaiah 56:1–8 and Acts 8:26–40 do explicitly describe the affirmation of the eunuch, a person in the ancient role who lived beyond the gender conventions available.

4 William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (J. Hatchard and Son, 1823)

5 Ben Witherington III. *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

6 Oppression is defined in [Merriam-Webster dictionary](#) as: "Unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power especially by the imposition of burdens; the condition of being weighed down; an act of pressing down; a sense of heaviness or obstruction in the body or mind"

7 Kelsi Watters. *Solidarity and Suffering: Liberation Christology from Black and Womanist Perspectives* (Published in Obsculta: [Volume 12 Issue 1](#))

8 Dale B. Martin. *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006)

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT “HOMOSEXUALITY”?

IF NEITHER SEX DIFFERENTIATION NOR GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY ARE THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN PARTNERSHIP, THEN WHAT IS?

While the work to undo the decades-long, dominant and exclusionary interpretations of these passages is important, its emphasis over and against the affirming dimensions of Christian theology for LGBTQ people has stifled exploration of a deeper meaning of sexuality for everyone. From Genesis 2, to Matthew 19, to Ephesians 5, what these passages make explicit (and is echoed throughout the rest of Scripture) is something mentioned earlier: marriage is sacred for Christians because it can represent the enduring love between Christ and the Church. Christian partnership creates an opportunity to live out God's love. While some kind of difference seems to be important in embodying this metaphor, understanding that all our differences can lead to empathy, compassion, good listening, sacrifice, and what it means to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” there is scant evidence that it is our biology or our views of gender that are the required difference. Anyone who has ever been in an intimate relationship of any kind can testify to the range of differences (and resulting conflicts) that are an inherent part of any two personalities attempting to integrate their lives. And remember, those who are not married but are not LGBTQ, like single people or people whose spouses have passed, are embraced as Christians. The larger point here is that God's design for Christian partnership is about reflecting the truest and sweetest love that anyone could know; that is the self-giving, ever-enduring, liberating love between God and creation made possible for us through Christ. A tall order, but nevertheless something countless LGBTQ individuals and couples have been living into and continue to live into today.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, it is important to remember that throughout church history, new information about people and the world have frequently led Christians to reconsider their beliefs. This need not be a reason to distrust Scripture, but rather should serve as an invitation to wrestle with the contexts of the biblical writers and our own

lived experiences. As it stands today, there are millions of faithful Christians around the world who have come to recognize the work of God in and through the relationships of LGBTQ people ([click here to see a list of denominational positions on LGBTQ people within Christianity](#)). As New Testament Scholar Daniel Kirk has [pointed out](#), Christians today would do well by the tradition of the apostles and our current witness in the world to recognize that theological abstractions aside, God has already clearly embraced LGBTQ people into full communion, and it is now the church's responsibility to simply honor that reality and *rejoice* (Luke 15).

FURTHER READING

- Cheryl B. Anderson. *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford University Press 2009)
- Karen R. Keen. *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018)
- Matthew Vines. *God and The Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent Books, 2014)
- James V. Brownson. *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013)
- Elizabeth M. Edman. *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know about Life and Love and How it Can Revitalize Christianity* (Beacon Press, 2016)
- Eugene F. Rogers. *“Same-sex Complementarity: A Theology of Marriage.”* (Published by The Christian Century, 2011)

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WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT TRANSGENDER PEOPLE?

INTRODUCTION

For several decades, political and theological debates related to LGBTQ issues have centered around same-sex relationships for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. While an exploration of that topic is important, the volume of faith resources dedicated to it have often not included reflection on the unique considerations related to gender identity. Mistakenly, some Christians have suggested that taking the Bible seriously requires people of faith to stand in opposition to the existence, health, and humanity of transgender people.⁹ Consequently gender-expansive people of all demographics and Christian traditions have been made to feel that they must choose between their faith and living a whole, healthy, and authentic life. Whether you are a ministry leader, the family member of a transgender person, or a trans person of faith yourself, this page seeks to serve as a brief overview of the Bible's precedent for affirming the full inclusion of transgender, non-binary, and other gender-expansive people in the full life of Christian community.

THE LANGUAGE WE USE

Sometimes it can feel overwhelming to learn new terms and new concepts, especially if we see those terms change in meaning or use from one context to another. Whether we are talking about transgender issues¹⁰ or about faith, this seems to be true. This resource aims only to offer a starting place for a dialogue on both. For the purposes of our writing, when we use **gender identity** we are referring to one's internal sense of being male, female, both, or neither. When we use the phrase "**sex assigned at birth**," what we mean is the sex that was assigned by a doctor at birth based on some combination of sex chromosomes, genes, gonads, and internal and external genitalia, as well as physiological hormones. When we use the word **transgender**, we are describing a person whose gender identity is different than the sex they were assigned at birth. It is an adjective, a descriptive word, and can encompass any variety of non-binary and gender-expansive identities. For example, consider Josh, a transgender man who grew up with his parents assuming he was a girl. For as long as he could remember, he knew himself to be a boy. But he didn't know about transgender people until he was older and could finally see himself in their stories and come out. Or consider Sam, a non-binary person who uses they/them pronouns. Sam grew up being told they were a boy but they never knew themselves to be a boy. They

came out as non-binary to reflect their authentic experience with their gender identity.

When we use **gender expression**, we are talking about the way that a person may outwardly reflect their internal sense of gender through presentation, such as through clothing, hair, voice and body language. **Sexual orientation**, which describes whom a person is physically and/or emotionally attracted to, is a separate category, and doesn't influence someone's gender identity or gender expression. It's important to understand that gender expression and sexual orientation are different from gender identity. In our examples above, Josh could be a transgender man who is gay, bisexual or straight. Sam could be a non-binary person who expresses their gender consistently in a more traditionally masculine or feminine way, or neither or both at the same time. If you're looking to answer [what the Bible has to say about same-sex relationships, you can find that on an additional resource page here](#).

When we use the term **affirming**, what we are referring to is the theological view that all expressions of gender are an integral part of God's design for diversity within the created order. When we use **non-affirming**, we are referring to the theological view that transgender and other expressions of gender variance are either a) sinful within themselves or b) that they are morally neutral but nevertheless a kind of disorder, mental illness, or other brokenness. Whether you already feel confident in your position or are searching for new possibilities, our hope is that researching, studying, and wrestling with the Scriptures and questions most relevant to trans experiences are part and parcel of what it means for Christians to "love God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind" (Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37, Luke 10:7).

WRESTLING WITH SCRIPTURE

Creation and the Gender Binary - Genesis 1:27; Genesis 2:18-24

When Christians think about gender, they tend to go back to the beginning. In Genesis, we find two stories about how things came to be, one of which says "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27, NRSV). If you grew up hearing these stories and living with people who seemed to fit inside these gender boxes, the

⁹ A part of the reason this seems to be so successful is the overwhelming number of people who say they do not have a personal close friend who is transgender. [In a PRRI survey conducted in 2019](#), it was found that less than one-quarter (24%) of Americans report having a close friend or family member who is transgender, compared to 46% who report having a bisexual close friend or family member, and nearly seven in ten (68%) who report having a gay or lesbian close friend or family member.

¹⁰ [The Human Rights Campaign's Reporting Guide](#) is another helpful tool developed so that reporters and media makers can begin to improve trans coverage. It provides insight for anyone seeking to use appropriate language, understand common shortcomings, and discover steps they can take to address trans communities more respectfully.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT TRANSGENDER PEOPLE?

existence of transgender people might seem to fly in the face of God's created order. However, when we look just a little closer at each of these passages we find a much more complex and beautiful world. For instance, when God creates men and women in Genesis 1, it's after creating opposites in every other corner of creation—day and night, land and sea, flying birds and swimming fish. Humans, then, are also created in an opposite pair—male and female. But the problem with a literal reading of this text that even though Genesis 1 sets up these binaries, God's creation exists in spectrums.

In between day and night we have dawn and dusk; between land and sea we have coral reefs and estuaries and beaches; between flying birds and swimming fish we have penguins and high jumping dolphins, not to mention that uncategorizable favorite the platypus! No one would argue that a penguin is an abomination for not fitting the categories of Genesis 1, or that an estuary isn't pleasing to God because it's neither land nor sea. In the same way, God gives every human a self that is unique and may not always fit neatly into a box or binary. Among cisgender people—that is those whose gender identities align with the sex they were assigned at birth, or non-transgender people—there is a wide variety in height, strength, hair distribution, size and shape of reproductive organs, and nearly all other physical characteristics, which makes it hard for every single person on earth to fit neatly inside one culture's categories of man or woman.¹¹ There is, too, a diversity among transgender and non-binary people when it comes to bodies, personalities, beliefs, and experiences. But rather than writing Genesis 1 off as fiction that doesn't match reality, many affirming Christians recognize that the stories set down in this chapter were never meant to catalogue all of creation (in which case, it would just be an encyclopedia), but rather to point us towards God's power and love. Not every microbe and constellation must be named in this chapter in order to have a purpose and a blessing.

Genesis 2 gives us a different perspective on the creation story, and here a non-gendered human is created first and then later a piece of the first person, Adam, is made into the second person, Eve. Based on the order of creation in this story, some theologians argue that this passage upholds a structure called gender complementarity.

Gender complementarity asserts that God created two fundamentally different genders which have strict corresponding societal roles; in short, men were created to lead and women were created to follow.¹² We don't have the space here to explore the rich biblical scholarship that has demonstrated the theological and pastoral need for Christian Egalitarianism, but suffice to say these views, even when held with the best intentions, have a consistent history of leading to emotional, spiritual, and physical violence against anyone, regardless of their assigned sex or their gender identity or presentation, who does not completely and unwaveringly conform to gendered expectations. Alternatively, moving away from gender complementarity frees Christians up to explore other biblical alternatives for identity, community, and relationship—alternatives based on the example Jesus set and called for in his teachings, rather than on gender difference.

One of the ways that Christians have historically understood the existence of suffering in the world is to attribute it to the idea that things are not now as they were originally created before the sin of Adam and Eve later in Genesis. Since the Fall, humans have experienced and caused things that are out of sync with God's plan, and some may question whether the existence of transgender people may be a result of the Fall, rather than something that God intended from the beginning. However, it's important to know that transgender people have existed across cultures and times—dating back thousands of years. We also know that when it comes to the suffering that transgender and non-binary people experience, most is linked to the stress and oppression caused by other people.¹³ Studies show that when transgender people are affirmed and loved, their well-being also benefits.¹⁴ With this in mind, it would be more likely that sin is at play in the oppressive and damaging ways we treat each other, and not in the very fact of someone's existence.

Clothing and gender expression - Deuteronomy 22:5

Deuteronomy 22:5, "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," (NRSV) is the only verse in all of Scripture that directly references gender-based notions of clothing.

11 For more on the diversity of creation, especially when it comes to assigned sex, see *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* by Joan Roughgarden (University of California Press, 2013)

12 To read more about gender complementarity and where this understanding falls short see [Point #4 on The Reformation Project's 'The Brief Biblical Case for LGBTQ Inclusion'](#) and *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* by James V. Brownson (Eerdmans, 2013).

13 Many studies have been done on the effect of minority stress on transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, including *Expecting Rejection: Understanding the Minority Stress Experiences of Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Individuals* by Brian A. Rood, Sari L. Reisner, et al, in *Transgender Health* (2016).

14 See *Chosen Name Use Is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation, and Suicidal Behavior Among Transgender Youth* by Stephen T. Russell, Amanda M. Pollitt, et al in *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2018) and *Mental Health of Transgender Children Who Are Supported in Their Identities* by Kristina R. Olson, Lily Durwood, et al in *Pediatrics* (2016) and *Intervenable Factors Associated with Suicide Risk in Transgender Persons: A Respondent Driven Sampling Study in Ontario, Canada* by Greta R. Bauer, Ayden I. Scheim, et al in *BMC Public Health* (2015) among others.

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While in many cases transgender people are not in fact “cross-dressing” (a term that implies one is crossing their gender identity rather than confirming it), but instead are affirming and reflecting their gender identity through the clothes they wear. This verse has still served as a stumbling block for enough Christians to warrant some exploration. Both affirming and non-affirming biblical scholars have a range of views on why this prohibition was written for its original audience. Some are convinced that forbidding the Hebrew people from dressing in clothes associated with a gender different than their own was a way to be set apart from Canaanite and Syrian religion where this phenomena was a part of certain worship rituals.¹⁵ Other scholars believe the prohibition was more of a way to reinforce previous instructions from the Torah that forbid “mixing” (for example, not blending fabrics, planting variations of seed, or eating shellfish), given the way Israel’s national purity and their maintenance of rigid categorical differences were bound together. A third perspective is that Deuteronomy 22:5 was written to keep a gender-segregated society truly segregated. This would prevent things like men and women engaging in various forms of forbidden sexual contact, women from entering the temple, men evading military service, women signing up for military service, and other behaviors perceived as contrary to the boundaries between the distinct parts of God’s created order.¹⁶

Beyond understanding why this verse was originally penned, a more pressing question for Christians to ask is whether or not we are supposed to follow the prohibitions present throughout all of Deuteronomy. The answer for most Christians today would be no, on account of the theological conviction that Jesus, through his life and death, has fulfilled the requirements of the laws Moses presented at Mt. Sinai in the story of Exodus, and because they do not believe that maintaining the integrity of God’s creation prohibits mixing. In fact, the incarnation of God as Jesus, the mixing of the fully divine and the fully human, is often viewed as the necessary context for humanity’s salvation altogether.¹⁷ Christians who maintain non-affirming perspectives on transgender and non-binary people must ask themselves why it is that this command is being upheld when they believe that most, if not all, of the other directives around it have been nullified.

Changing names - Genesis 32:28; Numbers 13:16; Matthew 16:17-18

Names are very important and in many cultures they are inseparable from how people connect with one another and establish meaning for their lives. While some transgender and non-binary people do not feel that affirming their gender identity requires a change in name or pronouns, many do. To this end, it feels important to lift up the way that Scripture is filled with stories of people having their name changed as well as stories of people changing the name by which they called upon God. These stories demonstrate that name change can be about proclaiming who one is to become, recognizing and confirming who one has always been, or some combination of the two. In Genesis 32 we read of a fearful patriarch, Jacob, on a pilgrimage back to his family from whom he was estranged several years prior as the result of his own wrong-doing. The night before he returns, Jacob is awoken by an attacker, a man whom he wrestles until daybreak leaving him with a displaced hip, a new name, and a blessing. Through the violent encounter Jacob is told he will now be called Israel, because he had “struggled with God and with humans and [had] overcome” (Gen 32:28, NIV). While the name Israel is interpreted differently from scholar to scholar, for the most part, it seems to confirm the longer character arc of Jacob, and perhaps the nation of Israel as a metaphor for a community that has indeed long struggled with God and yet persevered.

In Genesis 16 Hagar, the slave of Abram and Sarai, runs away after severe mistreatment and in the wilderness encounters an angel of God. The angel offers encouraging words and consequently Hagar changes God’s name to El-roi, meaning “one who sees.” This does not shift God’s identity so much as it confirms something poignant about God’s character that Hagar had not fully recognized before. Immediately following this story, we see in Genesis 17 a reaffirmation of the promises God made previously to Abram and Sarai. In this passage, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, which means “father of many nations” and the name of Sarai to Sarah, possibly meaning “princess of many.”

In Numbers 13 we read the story of Moses changing the name of Hoshea, son of Nun, to Joshua, and from there becoming the second-

¹⁵ Ian Cairns, *Deuteronomy: Word and Presence*. (William B. Eerdmans, 1992.)

¹⁶ Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, 1990)

¹⁷ Although the term ‘mixing’ to talk about Jesus can be associated with the heresy of Eutychianism (Jesus’ natures were so thoroughly combined that the result was that Jesus was not able to relate as a true human), the term used here is in keeping with the view that Jesus was truly God and truly man. Read more in ‘Constructing Hybridity and Heterogeneity: Asian American Biblical Interpretation from a Third-Generation Perspective’ by Frank M. Yamada in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* edited by Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan (Chalice Press, 2006)

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in-command to Moses. Similarly, Matthew 16 describes the interaction between Jesus and Simon where his name is changed to Peter, as a signal that he is to be “the rock” and foundation of the church. The Bible establishes a precedent that name changes can be either an uncovering of who God has always seen a person to be, or as the recognition of a new identity and a new beginning. These too are important principles at play for many transgender and non-binary people in being able to affirm their gender identities with themselves, with their communities, and ultimately with God.

Eunuchs as an example of gender diversity - Deuteronomy 23:1; Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 19:12; Acts 8:26-40

The word “transgender” is relatively new¹⁸, but it speaks to a host of age-old experiences. If you got in a time machine and interviewed people in the Bible, you wouldn't find anyone who would use this word, because it didn't exist, but you'd still find transgender and non-binary people. Some trans biblical scholars today are especially interested in the experiences of people in scripture referred to as “eunuchs.”¹⁹ Typically, eunuchs were people who were assigned male at birth who had their reproductive organs changed or removed prior to puberty, but the word “eunuch” in the ancient world would also sometimes be used for those who we would now call intersex.²⁰ Trans scholars today aren't interested in these individuals because they believe that eunuchs *identified* as transgender, but rather because some of the things the eunuchs in scripture *experienced* are similar to what trans people—and intersex people—experience today, particularly in terms of discrimination, oppression, and dehumanization.

In Deuteronomy 23:1 a law forbids people assigned male at birth who had their reproductive organs crushed or cut off from being part of the community of Israel. This meant that there were probably relatively few eunuchs in Israelite communities for many years, and they're mentioned rarely. However, once the Israelites were captured by Babylon and Persia, two cultures in which castration was more common, we begin to see more stories concerning eunuchs and their position in society. We see that eunuchs are allowed to move back and forth between men's and women's spaces, that they take on tasks and roles related to both genders, and because they were either intersex or physically changed before puberty they often looked different

from cisgender men and women. This was normal in Babylonian and Persian society, but still looked down on by the Israelites.

Once the people of Israel are freed from captivity, several prophets, including Isaiah, guide them in the rebuilding of their homeland. In Isaiah 56:1-8 God speaks through Isaiah and says that even though Deuteronomy 23 outlawed the participation of eunuchs in Israelite society, in the new Israel they will have a special place—God says, “I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 56:5, NRSV). This wide welcome would have been a relief for the eunuchs, but warring theological factions meant that as far as we know, this prophecy was never fulfilled.

Many years later, Jesus mentions eunuchs in Matthew 19:12, where he notes that there are many kinds of eunuchs, including “eunuchs who have been so from birth,” “eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others,” and “eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (NRSV). While the first group might include intersex people, and the second group people who were castrated by force, Christians have been arguing for centuries about who might be included in that third category. Regardless of whom he was referencing, what we do know is that in this moment, Jesus first of all does not denigrate eunuchs like others in his society may have done, and beyond that he actually lifts eunuchs up as a positive example. The fact that Jesus positively mentions people who are gender-expansive in his own time and place gives hope to many gender-expansive people today.

Finally, we see another important eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 who travels all the way from Ethiopia hoping to worship in the temple in Jerusalem, and who meets Philip, one of Jesus' followers, on the way home. Up to that point, we don't have a record of eunuchs becoming part of the early Christian church, but in this story in Acts we hear about this Ethiopian eunuch who, after hearing about Jesus, asks Philip “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36, NRSV). While Philip could have said that there was no precedent for this situation—that the Ethiopian's ethnicity as a non-Israelite or his identity as a eunuch might indeed prevent him—instead, Philip baptizes him with no questions

18 Human Rights Campaign Glossary of Terms

19 There's quite a lot of writing from trans people on this subject, but for an overview see *Towards a Transgender Theology: Que(e)rying the Eunuchs* by Lewis Reay in *Trans/Formations* by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (SCM Press, 2009). Additionally, for a perspective from transgender theologians who don't find eunuchs to be a helpful point of connection, see chapter 5, “What Does the Bible Say” in *Transfaith: A Transgender Pastoral Resource* by Chris Dowd and Christina Beardsley (Darton Longman & Todd Ltd, 2018).

20 For more on intersex people in scripture, and especially connections to the word “eunuch,” see *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* by Megan K. DeFranza (Eerdmans, 2015).

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asked and no strings attached. This story of a gender-expansive person of color welcomed as one of the first Christian converts is a powerful part of our spiritual history.

Being wonderfully made - Psalm 139:13-14

Psalm 139:13-14's reference to "being wonderfully made" in the "womb," is frequently referenced within non-affirming theologies to support the idea that being transgender or non-binary and pursuing medically necessary health care is a rejection of God as the designer of life. But that is a severely limiting interpretation, with implications well beyond transgender experiences. Psalm 139 implies that we are all created with love and intention and that *every part* of us was divinely formed with dignity—both our bodies *and* our inner knowledge of self. There is no textual reason to believe this excludes our gender identities or gender expressions. While it is true that physical transformation can be rooted in shame, unrealistic beauty standards, and body-negativity generally, for many people it can also stem from a position of love, care, and stewardship for their body. Transgender and non-binary people pursue physical change, not as an act of revulsion, but as an expression of being committed to integrity in body and spirit. They are acting on the conviction that being "fearfully and wonderfully made" means that peace and wholeness is actually what God wants for us and for the world, whatever that journey looks like to each person.

Often times, transgender people know God through their transgender journeys. Trans experiences can be a rich source through which God speaks different words both to that person and to the people around them; a message that God loves diversity and variation; a message that God invites people into collaboration and co-creating how we will move in and shape the world around us; a message that sometimes knowledge about who we are and who God made us to be can come in different stages and evolve over time.

Gender in Christian community - Galatians 3:28

One of the most difficult things human beings have had to learn how to do is to work together despite our differences, and that's no less true in the church. There are times when we emphasize the things that we share, and times when we have to emphasize our different gifts and talents even when they seem to put us at odds. We see this tension play out in many of the Apostle Paul's letters to the early Christian churches, and in his letter to the Galatians he toes this line again when he says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, NRSV). While on the surface this verse may suggest that we ignore or even try to get rid of our differences, it's also clear from the rest of Paul's letters that he took these differences seriously during his ministry. He probably was not suggesting that a person ceased to be male or female after baptism,

and yet perhaps, when we die and rise again with Christ, we might be made free from the cultural power dynamics that cause one person to oppress another based on race, ethnicity, class, ability, gender, or any other difference we may have. Instead, rather than trying to destroy or ignore a facet of humanity that makes us all different, we might consider dissolving the harmful power dynamics that tear us apart. This balance between sameness and difference, between the individual and the communal, is necessary for life together in Christ.

BUT WHAT IF THESE INTERPRETATIONS ARE WRONG?

The answer to this question will be different depending on the tradition of the person asking. For example, for some Christians, affirming or not affirming transgender and non-binary people is connected to salvation and eternity. For other Christians, the afterlife isn't their main concern, but instead their focus is determining what it means for Christians to contribute to human flourishing and to the moral integrity of the church. Whatever is at stake for the person asking, it is important to note the role of humility, grace, and having a consistent standard to apply in discerning what is true of God. We read in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that until Christ returns we are bound to see truth in a way that is incomplete, a mere reflection, "as in a mirror, dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12, NRSV). The Bible calls its interpreters to the awareness that even if ultimate truth about any subject isn't always in our grasp, we can still remain committed to the task of trying to find it.

As we wrestle, though, we can find solace in knowing that our salvation is not based on our ability to read God's mind, or our ability to be absolutely perfect and hold all the right views—we are saved by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8, NRSV). Additionally, for many Christians, the metric Jesus provided in the Gospel of Matthew about good fruit and bad fruit is one of the most important tools for interpretation: "...[E]very good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:17-18, NRSV). A quick survey of the destructive fruit that has come from non-affirming teaching on transgender communities demonstrates the need to explore what other theologies might have to say. Conversely, the outcome of affirming theologies on gender identity lead to words and actions that are reconciliatory, restorative, and profoundly "good news"—not just for individuals, but families, churches, and entire communities.

CONCLUSION

If you are new to this conversation, it's normal to feel overwhelmed, or fearful that other people will accuse you of affirming transgender and non-binary people merely because it seems politically correct or trendy. However, even though it is true that there has been an increase

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in transgender and non-binary visibility in media, our society has never seen as many trans-exclusionary bills in state legislatures, public faith statements made against transgender people in churches, or higher rates of recorded crimes and violence committed against transgender people.²¹ Having the biblical and theological precedent demonstrated throughout this writing doesn't guarantee anyone protection from continued discrimination. It is always a profound act of courage to come out to yourself and to your community. Similarly, for the friends and family of transgender and non-binary people, to publicly express your love and support in many contexts can be an act of critical solidarity.

In the midst of fear, stress, or confusion, it's important to remember that we are invited to pause, breathe, and simply observe the work God is already doing. The experiences of gender diversity can be found in nearly every culture throughout recorded human history. Traditionally gender non-conforming people were given communal roles as spiritual leaders, healers, conflict mediators, and cultural conduits. While not all of these experiences map perfectly on to contemporary trans experiences, what we do see similarly today are countless examples of transgender and non-binary people across denominations operating in specialized roles within the church whether formally recognized or not. Transgender and non-binary people are actively preaching, teaching, leading, pastoring, and offering their time, energy, and various gifts for ministry and service. What this tells us is that the real issue here is not whether a person can be transgender and Christian, but whether the church will acknowledge and empower those whom God is already working through to enrich the whole life of the body of Christ. As we all approach this topic with compassion, humility, and courage, we may call to mind the words of Gamaliel, a teacher who defended the persecuted apostles of the early church: "...[I]f this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:34-39, NRSV).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [This Is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians by Christina Beardsley \(Darton Longman & Todd Ltd, 2017\)](#)
- [Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians by Austen Hartke \(Westminster John Knox Press, 2018\)](#)
- [Transgender Welcome by Bishop Gene Robinson - The Center for American Progress](#)
- [An Affirmation Guide to Trans and Gender-Expansive Identities by Taj Smith, edited by Q Christian Fellowship](#)
- [Nicole Garcia on Being a Trans Latina Pastor - 2020 Q Christian Fellowship Conference](#)
- [La Familia: Una Conversación Sobre Nuestras Familias, la Biblia, la Orientación Sexual y la Identidad de Género - The Institute for Welcoming Resources](#)

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21 [Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2020](#). (HRC 2020)