

# Discerning What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches

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## Introduction

My name is Loren Johns and I teach New Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. I have been asked by leaders in Mennonite Church Canada to prepare a short video on the Bible and sexuality that might assist the church in its process of “Being a Faithful Church.” This is my response to that request.

My own hopes are modest: namely, that what I offer here will in some way prove useful and helpful for congregations and area churches that are attempting to be faithful to God in relating with gays and lesbians. I want to address three issues: first, how Anabaptists have approached the Bible historically; second, what the Bible says about homosexuality; and third, how the broader biblical message might help the church in its present discernment.

## How Have Anabaptists Approached the Bible?

*First*, how have Anabaptists approached the Bible? Clearly there were differences between Anabaptists within the sixteenth century and even greater differences between Anabaptists of the sixteenth century and Anabaptists today. There are yet more differences between and among Anabaptists around the globe today. Despite all these differences, I believe Christians today who identify with Anabaptism can and should learn some things from our Anabaptist forebears. Although none of their insights was unique, Anabaptists in the sixteenth century approached the Bible distinctively. That distinction lies in the particular combination of seven characteristics in their approach.

### Word and Spirit, Hand-in-Hand

The **first** of these is that Scripture must be interpreted through the voice of the Holy Spirit. The written word, wonderful as it is, does not stand on its own. The Bible bears fruit in the church only through the Spirit’s direction of the church in both its understanding and its

active response to the Spirit’s leading. When reading Scripture today, the church needs to recover a sense of its dependence on the Holy Spirit in discerning God’s voice in Scripture. This means listening prayerfully to God and to each other.

### Rule of Paul: Interpreting in Community

The **second** is the Rule of Paul. Scripture is best read and interpreted by diverse Christians gathered together to discern the mind of Christ. This principle limits the interpretation of isolated individuals while also clearly valuing the contributions of pastors, church leaders, and biblical scholars. They contribute *in service* to the community’s task of discernment, but not as *a substitution* for it.

### Rule of Christ: Interpreting for Mutual Discipling

The **third** is the Rule of Christ, which emphasizes that God blesses the discerning function of the gathered body particularly when it focuses on *mutual discipling*—helping one another discern and live out the practical implications of the Lordship of Christ. This task of mutual discipling has always been challenging and many of today’s heirs of Anabaptism are so conscious of past failures to do this well that they are reluctant to do it at all.

### Christ, Center of the Bible and Center of Our Reading

The **fourth** is Christ-centeredness, which holds that God is most fully revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The authority of Scripture lies primarily in its uniquely authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, himself the Word of God. As a result, we interpret Scripture best when we use the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ as criteria to help us decide between alternative readings of a text. Another aspect of Christ-centeredness is the insight that the purpose of discernment in the first place is to bring our lives into greater conformity to the Lordship of Christ in our discipleship.

### The Formative Power of Obedience

The **fifth** distinctive is confidence in the revealing power of obedience itself. A pre-commitment to respond in faith and love to what

the Spirit says through Scripture opens one to the influence of the Spirit, both in understanding and in action. An important aspect of this principle is that Scripture's *formational* power is as important as its *informational* power. Faithful response is itself a kind of understanding.

### The Essential Clarity of Scripture

The **sixth** distinctive is confidence in the essential clarity of Scripture. To be sure, interpretation is always required. Some people think they take the Bible as it stands, when in fact they take it as they understand it. The point of this distinctive is that the church need not—in fact, it *must* not—leave interpretation to the experts alone. Five hundred years ago God blessed the church with an explosion of life-changing Bible reading as European Christians concluded that they didn't need some bishop to tell them what it means. May God bless the church with a similar outbreak of life-changing Bible reading to-day!

### The Relationship of the Old & New Testaments

The **last** distinctive is contested today. It is the priority of the New Testament over the Old Testament. Although there are good historical reasons behind the sixteenth-century Anabaptists' clear preference of the New Testament over the Old, believers today who identify with Anabaptism often under-appreciate the Old Testament. The New Testament writers themselves constantly reflected their profound indebtedness to the revelation of God in the Old Testament, and we should too. And since both testaments bear witness to who Jesus is, the Christ-centeredness mentioned above can help to keep us from reading the Old Testament wrongly.

Yes, the Anabaptists themselves differed on these points. And yes, much has changed in the last 500 years. And yes, the lived experience of Anabaptists in rural Indonesia or Honduras differs substantially from that of Anabaptists living in Saskatoon. Nevertheless, I think we can and should learn from our mothers and fathers in the faith about how to handle the gift of God we know as the Scriptures.

## What Does the Bible Say about Homosexuality?

*Second*, what does the Bible say about homosexuality? The answer to this question has an easy part and a hard part.

### The Easy Part

First, the easy part. Almost every biblical passage that seems to address same-sex activity overtly treats it as an expression of abnormal sexuality—not just a morally neutral abnormality, but an abnormality that falls short of God's will for humanity morally.

For instance, Leviticus 18:22 says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." And Leviticus 20:13 says, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them."

These two legal pronouncements in Leviticus are more relevant to the church's discernment than the narratives in Genesis 19 about Lot in Sodom or in Judges 19 about the Levite in Gibeah for several reasons. First, these latter narratives are morally complex in a range of ways. Second, they emphasize the wrongness of sexual violence rather than the wrongness of same-gender sex. Ezekiel 16 even identifies the sin of Sodom as a gross disregard for the needs of the poor. Third, same-gender sex *illustrates* the despicable violence that lies in the heart of these men, but same-gender love and attraction figures nowhere in these stories.

In Romans 1:26-27, Paul uses same-gender sex as an illustration of what happens when people fail to acknowledge God as Creator. Illustrative of their abandonment to their degrading passions, "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul says, "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the

greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

In 1 Timothy 1:9-11, we read that “the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

The word *sodomites* in the NRSV translates the Greek word *arsenokoitēs*, the same word that appears in 1 Corinthians 6:9. This word does not appear in Greek literature prior to the New Testament. However, its meaning is clear enough. It means “a man who beds another man.”

Thus, two passages in the Old Testament and three passages in the New Testament seem to address same-sex activity overtly. In all five passages, the Bible condemns what looks very much like expressions of sexual activity between two persons of the same sex.

### The Hard Part

So what’s the hard part? The hard part comes in knowing how to read these passages in light of what Scripture points to in other ways and what the Spirit is saying to the church today. You may be tempted to object, “But since these five passages are so clear, why is listening to the Spirit needed?”

I would like to show why these passages are not as straightforward as they might seem.

### The Impact of Culture on Moral Discernment

**First**, we often seriously underestimate the impact of culture in forming our sense of right and wrong. History is littered with examples of God’s people insisting on the wrongness of some act, only to discov-

er, 100 years later, that cultural sensibilities were more involved than they thought. As in biblical times, we are constantly shaped by culture, even as we are shapers of it.

Leviticus itself bears witness to the fact that cultural sensibilities were relevant in chapters 18 and 20. Both passages use the word *abomination* (or *toebah*) to describe same-gender sex. Other examples of *toebah* include Egyptians eating with Hebrews. That was an abomination to the Egyptians (Gen 43:32). Or the Israelites’ habit of raising sheep—also an abomination to the Egyptians (Gen 46:34). Deuteronomy clearly says that cross-dressing is an abomination to God (22:5), and that putting money earned in prostitution into the offering is an abomination to God (23:18). But some texts are not clear about who, exactly, finds some act abominable (e.g., Lev. 18:22; 20:13). Although Leviticus clearly *implies* that these practices are as abominable to God as they are to the Israelites as a whole, Genesis does *not* imply that either the Israelites or God hold abominable what the Egyptians do (Gen 43:32; 46:34). All of this is to say, first, that what people hold as “abominable” derives, at least in part, from cultural sensibilities, and second, we humans like to imagine that God shares our particular cultural sensibilities. That should give us some pause.

I think it is important that God’s people not simply follow culture. Indeed, God’s call, “Be holy, as I am holy” is in part a call to be separate, to be devoted. It’s a call to be Other, to be pilgrims and aliens in a foreign land. Nevertheless, all Christians today live out our discipleship in culturally specific ways. It is impossible to be “above” culture, since we live all of life within culture. This matter is complicated: we cannot simply avoid culture in expressing our faithfulness, yet it is sometimes difficult to separate our cultural sensibilities from the whispering voice of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’s own love for those on the margins—the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and others from the wrong side of the tracks—was scandalous in his day.

### Diversity in the Bible Regarding Sexual Ethics

A **second** issue that speaks to the hard part of reading scripture on this topic is the difficulty of deriving a sexual ethic from the Bible. The New Testament speaks most univocally about the importance of avoiding sexual immorality, *porneia* in the Greek. But it does not de-

fine the word *porneia*. We do have some help: Fornication is wrong, as is adultery and being sexually active with one's mother or step-mother.

In the Old Testament, the fathers of the faith had multiple wives and even concubines. Patriarchy ruled the day and the disempowerment of women seemed to be no one's concern. Genesis attributes the death of Judah's son Onan to his lack of obedience to his covenant obligations, not to any sexual immorality (Gen 38). In fact, the Old Testament seems to treat covenant obligations as more important than sexual ethics as such. While the New Testament goes somewhat further than the Old in its exhortations to avoid sexual immorality, neither testament seems interested in detailing exactly what is morally acceptable and what is not. This is significant.

### A Consistent Approach to the Holiness Code

A **third** issue that speaks to the hard part of reading scripture on this topic has to do more specifically with the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17-26. Why is it that we practice parts of this code, but not other parts? I have never heard a pastor preach about the immorality of wearing shirts made of mixed fabrics, like cotton and polyester, or the immorality of charging interest when loaning money, or the evils of working on Saturday. Why is that? Is it because we don't take the Bible seriously enough? No. Is it because of the ambiguity of Scripture on these matters? No. The Bible speaks with one voice on the evils of wearing clothes made with mixed fabrics and the evils of charging interest when loaning money. The primary reason we are not urged to avoid these practices today is because of the consensus that has developed in the church that these practices are not important ones for today's church.

Indeed, struggles over how to discern the voice of God have been with us for centuries. At one time, the U.S. church struggled with whether God blessed slavery. At another time, some struggled with how far the church should go in saving its members from worldly drift in how men and women dressed (this burden fell mostly on the women, as it turned out). We should seek to embrace the ongoing struggle of discernment, not avoid it. If we avoided the voice of the Holy Spirit and sought instead to do exactly what the Scriptures say

without using our spiritual judgment, some of our children would not have survived to adulthood, since the Scriptures clearly direct parents to stone their rebellious teenagers (see Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

### Matthew 19:12 and Eunuchs

A **fourth** issue that speaks to the hard part of reading scripture on this topic relates to how we should read Matthew 19:12. At the end of Jesus' teaching on divorce, his disciples express their surprise. The disciples conclude that if Jesus is right, a man's obligations toward God and toward his wife in marriage are so serious that he should not marry lightly. Jesus seems to agree. He says, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Matt 19:11-12).

What does Jesus mean by this? And is it relevant for our discernment? Neither question has a clear answer. Although this verse is difficult and I cannot address it in detail here, it seems to me that Jesus is speaking about sexual celibacy here rather than singleness in general.

The Old Testament preserves a most interesting conversation or debate about eunuchs. Some biblical writers considered eunuchs physically defective, and thus excluded from the congregation (see Deut 23:1; Lev 21:17-23). Isaiah 56 offers another perspective: eunuchs who keep the Sabbath and observe the Law deserve to be accepted by the congregation along with anyone else (cf. Isa 56:3-5). In its context in Matthew 19, Jesus seems to be saying that sexual fulfillment itself is not essential in the Reign of God. Jesus also says, however, that not everyone can accept this statement, suggesting that celibacy is and will remain a calling; it should not be demanded across the board.

Lest you hear me saying that we can't really take the Bible very seriously when it comes to sexual morality, I am saying just the opposite. I think we should take it *more* seriously. We should try hard to be

consistent as we hear and obey Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even though that discernment is not always easy.

### How Does the Broader Biblical Message Help?

In the third part, I would like to identify potential help from the broader biblical message. Fortunately, the Bible offers much-needed help in the area of how to go about discerning God's will. Many stories in the Bible deal with how God's people have approached this task.

### Biblical Warrants for Major Theological Shifts

If the church today were to discern that God does indeed bless the love and the lifelong commitments of covenant faithfulness between two gay men or between two lesbian women—despite the straightforward meaning of the five Scriptures cited above—doing so would require and represent a significant theological shift in the position of the church historically. Is such a shift *ever* warranted? In a word, yes. We have examples from within the Scriptures themselves for such a significant shift. But is the Holy Spirit nudging the church today to consider such a shift in this case? This question lies at the heart of our collective discernment, as I see it.

### You Want Me to Eat What?

The early church leaders had been taught all their lives which foods were clean and which foods were unclean. Jesus said and did some things that seemed to reinterpret or reprioritize this biblical teaching. In Acts 10, Peter had a dream in which God seemed to be saying something different from Leviticus 11. Leviticus 11 is clear enough about which animals are clean and which are unclean, yet in Acts 10, God tells Peter to eat animals that God expressly forbids in Leviticus 11. How can this be? Some of us have come to understand today that it is okay to eat pork, but what must it have been like for believers trying to discern this matter at the time?

Peter was understandably reluctant to go against something he had been taught all his life. But two important things happened that helped him change his mind: first, God spoke to him in a dream, and

God spoke *three times* to make sure that Peter wouldn't miss it. This gave Peter enough courage to testify publically in his preaching to what God was telling him, even if Peter himself was unclear about all of its implications. Second, God confirmed that message by pouring out the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles in Caesarea. This baptism of the Spirit convinced Peter's fellow believers from Joppa that these Gentiles can and should be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, just as they were as Jews.

I am sure this wasn't easy for Peter. A whole body of people—namely, the Gentiles—was being excluded from the worship of God because of tradition and the early church's reading of Leviticus 11, and it took a vision from God and the clear evidence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these Gentiles to justify their inclusion—an inclusion that seems to bypass Leviticus 11.

### Early Church Discernment in Acts 15

A second example of such a shift occurs in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas's ministry among the Gentiles was bearing much fruit. The problem arose when certain individuals from Judea wanted to insist that these Gentile believers in Jesus be circumcised. After all, Genesis 17 is clear about the centrality of circumcision to God's covenant with Abraham. What to do?

Acts 15:6 says that the apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. I would like to commend a close study of Acts 15 for what it says and what it implies *about the church's discernment of God's will*. I think the church today can and should learn from Acts 15, along with Galatians 2, where Paul offers some different perspectives on what happened. Why the apostles and elders did not refer directly to Genesis 17 is not clear to me, since Genesis 17 appears to speak most directly to the topic at hand.

Apparently people spoke openly and passionately about this topic. Even before the meeting, Paul and Barnabas “had no small dissension and debate” with the folks from Judea about this matter. Verse 7 says there was “much debate” on the matter in Jerusalem. Various leaders spoke in turn, while “the whole assembly kept silence, and

listened” (v. 12). In the end, James was able to articulate a compromise solution and to back it up with Scripture.

In studying Acts 15, please note that the NIV translation of v. 19 is better than that of the NRSV. The NRSV has James saying, “Therefore, I have reached the decision that . . .,” while the NIV has James saying, “It is my judgment, therefore, . . .” The Greek verb *krinō* is capable of a wider range of meaning than either the NIV or the NRSV implies. In fact, one should probably translate it as, “My own opinion, therefore, is that . . .,” or “So I think that . . .” The Greek implies that James is consciously speaking for himself, not for the body as a whole. Even if James *had* said, “I have reached the decision,” it would have been necessary for the gathered body to judge and weigh what he said, according to 1 Corinthians 14:29.

### Experience, Reason, Scripture, Tradition, and the Holy Spirit

So what kind of evidence did the early church consider in discerning this matter? *First*, we don’t know if or how they included Genesis 17 in their discernment. Acts 15 is silent on that matter, despite the obvious relevance of Genesis 17. *Second*, they listened to their **experience**. Story-telling was important to the early church’s discernment. Verses 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, and 14 all testify in some way to the importance of telling stories about how people have experienced the grace and power of God in their lives. Such stories were relevant to their discernment, even if they were not the last word. *Third*, they used their **reason**. They debated with one another and listened to one another. Verses 6-11 all testify in one way or another to their use of reason and debate to address this matter. They were thoughtful. They spoke and listened. *Fourth*, they used **Scripture**. They looked for ways in which Scripture supported what they were beginning to see as the activity of the Holy Spirit. In vv. 16-18, James quotes from the Greek version of Amos 9:11-12, supplementing that with Jeremiah 12:15 and Isaiah 45:21. *Fifth*, they used **tradition**. James’s quotation of Scripture is designed to show that the Gentile mission was actually God’s idea from the start—it was not some novel idea recently introduced. Verses 1 and 21 also indicate that tradition itself can be ambiguous. *Both* sides of the debate appealed to tradition. *Finally*, they listened to what the **Holy Spirit** was saying to them.

According to the Bible, the church took these five elements into consideration in their discernment process: experience, reason, Scripture, tradition, and the voice of the Holy Spirit. Thus, appeals to experience, reason, tradition, and listening to the Spirit are not *alternatives* to listening to Scripture. On the contrary, a close reading of Scripture itself suggests that the church does well to take *all* of these into consideration when discerning the mind of God.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, let me offer five summary remarks for your consideration and testing. *First*, although the Bible bears witness to a wide range of sexual activity without condemning it, we should

#### Avoid sexual Immorality

take seriously its emphasis on avoiding sexual immorality (admittedly more characteristic of the New Testament than the Old Testament). The church should resist pressure from the culture that suggests that sexual morality is strictly a private matter. Whatever the church decides about the propriety of same-sex covenants, it must not let go of its emphasis that sexual promiscuity is wrong and that sexual activity should be reserved for persons who have made a lifelong covenant commitment to each other before God and God’s people.

#### Sexual Violence Is Clearly Wrong

*Second*, sexual violence is clearly wrong. Because this point is not controversial, I will not dwell on it.

#### Silence of the Bible about Same-Gender Love

*Third*, the Bible never speaks to the morality of same-gender love or attraction. The story of David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18–20 is sometimes appealed to in this respect. The text does speak approvingly of their same-gender love for each other, even though some members of their family apparently disapproved of it (1 Sam 20:30). David and Jonathan pledged their love to one another, formalizing it in a covenant (18:3) that they understood as blessed by God (20:8). They exchanged gifts (18:4). They kissed each other and wept over each other (20:41), and when Jonathan died in battle, David wrote a love song in which he said, “I am distressed for you, my brother Jon-

athan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26). However, despite all this suggestive language, there is no clear indication in Scripture that their relationship was sexual. I think the proper conclusion is that although this story does bear witness to the beauty of mutual love between two men, it does not bear witness to a sexually active gay relationship.

My point here is that with the possible exception of this story, the Bible does not address the propriety of same-gender love or attraction. The critical question for our discernment here is, How significant is that observation?

### Love, the Most Important Commandment

*Fourth*, the people of God have long recognized that some sense of order or priority in understanding God’s will is helpful. When a scribe asked Jesus which commandment was the most important, Jesus did *not* say, “You can’t prioritize God’s will, since all commandments are equal.” Instead, Jesus said that the most important commandment in all of Scripture is to love God with all of one’s being, and the second-most important commandment is to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:29-31). Even though this reminder does not substitute for our ethical discernment around sexuality, we must not lose sight of this call to love.

### Limits of Knowledge, Not Claiming Too Much

*Finally*, however the church comes out in its ethical discernment process, we would do well to admit our limitations when it comes to understanding God. I am grateful that God has chosen to reveal Godself in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We can indeed know God in a way that gives us access to life. At the same time, Paul warns us not to claim too much. We all have a learning disability when it comes to knowing God. Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 13. I like to remind people that Paul wrote this chapter *for congregational life*, not for weddings, even if it is appropriate for weddings.

This call to embrace the hard work of discernment, listening, and speaking openly is not an implicit promise that if we do all of this

discernment well, we are sure to know the truth. In fact, precisely *because* of our limitations regarding knowledge and our ability to hear the Spirit’s voice, we can expect sincere people to conclude different things about what the Spirit is saying. Even though we can and should expect the Spirit to lead us into all truth, we should not expect uniformity in the results of our collective work of discernment around the world. There is wisdom in not claiming too much for ourselves—perhaps especially in our claims to wisdom! So when knowledge and listening to the Spirit leave us short of the uniformity of perspective for which we had hoped—and it sometimes will, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 13—faith, hope, and love can still get us through.

### The Blessing of God Amid Partial Understandings

Our prophecies are partial, even when the Spirit inspires that prophecy! We know only in part as we hope for a time when our limitations will come to an end. Even with the Holy Spirit’s help, we see in a mirror, dimly, but will someday see face to face. Now we know only in part; but a day will come when we will know fully, even as we ourselves have been fully known by God. In the meantime, faith, hope, and love provide a more solid foundation for our life together than do prophecy or knowledge. And the greatest of these is love. May God bless God’s people with that love amid our discerning!

### Credits

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