

*1 John 4:16b (NRSV) God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 1 John 4:21 (NRSV) The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

But what if my brother and sister are gay or lesbian?

This is the question that has the Church today in conflict. It's not a Presbyterian or even a Protestant conflict; every expression of the Church has taken a stand. And for all the books that have been written, the papers and policies that have been published, for all the ways the Church is wrestling with this question intellectually and theologically, this is a very personal question. It's not an abstract academic exercise. It's personal. It's about people we know and love; brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, friends and members of our church. It's also about core values and deeply held convictions. We believe it matters how we live and to shift from the traditional view that homosexual intimacy is a sin to a view that accepts this behavior and welcomes and includes gays and lesbians in the church as ordained leaders feels like we are abandoning Biblical values for the values of an increasingly decadent society.

Love isn't license; it isn't a free pass to "gather ye rosebuds while ye may." It does matter how we live. Our lesson from 1 John and our lesson from Acts taught me that Biblical values command me to welcome and include gays and lesbians not only as church members (we've done that for quite a while) but also as ordained ruling elders, teaching elders, and deacons in the Presbyterian Church. For me, Biblical values are as simple and complex as this, "God loves you...and "them" too."

## ① God Loves You

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When I was in college, I was in Campus Crusade for Christ. "Crusade"

as we called it (though now the name has changed as "Crusade" now evokes some unpleasant memories) focused on evangelism. Successful evangelism was defined as "sharing the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God." To share the gospel, we carried around copies of the Four Spiritual Laws, and if someone was interested, we'd share them with them.

Law 1 read: "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life."

God loves you. This is the gospel. This is good news! *1 John 4:9-10 (NRSV) God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

God loves you. God forgives you. God accepts you, not because of anything we've done; not because we somehow deserve it, but because that's who God is. "*God is love,*" so God loves you.

But what if I'm gay or lesbian?

I used to think that gays and lesbians either had to change and become heterosexual, or refrain from sexual intimacy entirely; they had to practice in words that used to be in our Book of Order, "chastity in singleness."

This is a wonderful plan for my life?

I tried to ignore that question, but as I listened to the debates, I heard folks talk about their struggle, their deep desire to not be gay or lesbian; they fought it every day, every way, and that fight deeply wounded them.

And I read stories like the one that blazed across the blogosphere this week: Pastor Sean Harris from North Carolina said the following in an hour-long sermon last Sunday: "So your little son starts to act a little girlish when

he is four years old and instead of squashing that like a cockroach and saying, 'Man up, son, get that dress off you and get outside and dig a ditch, because that is what boys do,' you get out the camera and you start taking pictures of Johnny acting like a female and then you upload it to YouTube and everybody laughs about it and the next thing you know, this dude, this kid is acting out childhood fantasies that should have been squashed.

Dads, the second you see your son dropping the limp wrist, you walk over there and crack that wrist. Man up. Give him a good punch. Ok? You are not going to act like that. You were made by God to be a male and you are going to be a male. And when your daughter starts acting too butch, you reign [sic] her in. And you say, 'Oh, no, sweetheart. You can play sports. Play them to the glory of God. But sometimes you are going to act like a girl and walk like a girl and talk like a girl and smell like a girl and that means you are going to be beautiful. You are going to be attractive. You are going to dress yourself up.'"<sup>1</sup>

This is a wonderful plan for our sons and daughters? The gospel sounds so much like hate that our sons and daughters can't hear us say, "God loves you." I wonder how many gays and lesbians read that story this week and flashed back to a time when they were punched or made to be someone they are not?

That's not the gospel truth! The gospel is good news. Good news for us heterosexuals, and good news for "them" too. It's good news that we are commanded to share; good news that we all need to hear – "God loves you."

## ② God Loves "Them" Too

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I was troubled. On the one hand, passages in the Bible in Leviticus and Romans seem pretty clear that gay and lesbian sexual intimacy does

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/01/north-carolina-pastor-sea\\_n\\_1468618.html?ref=mostpopular](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/01/north-carolina-pastor-sea_n_1468618.html?ref=mostpopular)

not please God. On the other hand, the New Testament is filled with the command to *"love one another."*

Should I go against the Bible in the name of love? How do I continue to submit to the authority of Scripture? How can I reconcile my core beliefs with this command I kept reading over and over and over again, *1 John 4:21 (NRSV) those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. "Love one another." "Love one another." "Love one another."*

I can get to know the Ethiopian eunuch. We read about him in today's lesson from Acts. He's on his way home from Jerusalem; he's reading the Bible but doesn't understand what he's reading. The Spirit puts Phillip in his path. "Go talk to him" urges the Spirit. Phillip does. The eunuch is converted to faith in Jesus Christ. "What's to keep me from being baptized?" he asks. "Look, there's some water." Phillip baptizes him. The Spirit spirits Phillip away. The eunuch returns to Ethiopia.

Arlo Duba, a noted theologian in the area of worship wrote an article about his change of mind regarding gays and lesbians in church leadership. This article provides an in-depth study of the significance of the Ethiopian eunuch. He writes: "Abba Johannis, a priest of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was a student at Princeton Seminary. In conversation with him he stated that the Ethiopian eunuch is considered the founder of that denomination. (This is affirmed by Eusebius in about the year 300.) Only now do I start to realize how the story of the baptism of the eunuch fits this pattern of inclusion. Here was a person of a different gender condition, in the Bible, who exercised leadership in the Christian church, and it was a distinguished leadership!"

"Most commentators on Acts 8 have emphasized the Ethiopian's nationality as the focus of the story. But the word "Ethiopian" is used only once. The

word “eunuch” is used five times. If nationality were the issue, Luke could have repeated “Ethiopian” in each of those instances. My conclusion was that Luke wants us to focus on the sexual/gender issue. That led me to a study of the use of the word eunuch in scripture. The Hebrew word, *saris* is translated by at least ten different words in contemporary translations of the Bible. It is true that this word basically means an emasculated male (literally, a nonmale). But here too there are variations: emasculated before puberty, after puberty, one vowed to voluntary celibacy. There are a variety of meanings regarding the sexuality of eunuchs. They were not asexual. There is evidence that some eunuchs were not chaste, that those castrated after puberty could **[be sexually active]** achieve erection and penetration, but were “barren.””

“Note well: Jesus himself recognized at least three of these varying definitions of “eunuch” in *Matthew 19:12*. [*Matthew 19:12 (NRSV) 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.*”] And it became evident to me that Luke, in using this ambiguous blanket term, was trying to get across a broad instance of sexual-gender inclusivity in keeping with this increasing inclusivism theme in Luke-Acts....”<sup>2</sup>

Scholarly work like Duba’s has changed the Church’s mind before. Most recently, it changed the Church’s mind (well, most of the Protestant Church’s mind) regarding women’s ordination. Scholars brought to light the leadership role of women in the Bible like Phoebe in Romans 16. If the early church, the church of the apostles, had women leaders, then we have a precedent for having women leaders today, and so we do.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Rev. Dr. Arlo Duba. May 2, 2012 <http://www.mlp.org/fmd/files/Interview%20with%20Rev.%20Duba%203.pdf>.

Duba's work convinced me that the Ethiopian eunuch provides a Biblical precedent for gays and lesbians to serve as leaders in the Church. I invite you to ponder this, pray on this, and ask God to help you discern, "What does it mean to love my brother and sister who are gay or lesbian?"

As you do, believe the good news! God loves you! God loves you... and "them" too!" "God loves *us* and has a wonderful plan for *our* lives including *our* life together." God loves *us*. God forgives *us*. God accepts *us*, not because of anything *we've* done; not because *we* somehow deserve it, but because that's who God is. "God is love," so God loves you...and "them" too. Amen.