

# A deeply biblical, affirming position:

*How do we honor the Bible and arrive at an affirming view?*

*Last updated: 6.16.25*

**Introduction:** Dwell Church is part of a nationwide movement that seeks to be unapologetically biblical and unapologetically inclusive. At Dwell, Jesus-Centered is our core-most value, and that entails a high view of scripture. We share a deep commitment that the Bible, when read well, is an essential non-negotiable for following Jesus. As this document makes clear, the Bible leads us to an inclusive position. This document is best used as a reference, but a full read through would be fruitful too. We hope this blesses you!

**There are 9 parts to this document:**

1. **Good v Bad Readings of the Bible**
2. **Our philosophy of what the Bible is**
3. **Other ways to do this, and the Dwell Church way**
4. **6 relevant passages on LGBTQ+ issues**
5. **Relevant science**
6. **Acts Chapter 15**
7. **Covenantal Fidelity**
8. **Preston Sprinkle**
9. **TLDR: Boiling it down to one or two (or 3) sentences**

## Part 1: Good and Bad Readings of the Bible

The first and most important step in honoring the Bible is acknowledging that it can be misused in significant and highly harmful ways. Because there are bad readings of the Bible, we have to map out what constitutes a *good* reading. First, let's explore what we mean by 'bad readings.'

**Bad Readings:** Obviously, there are readings of Scripture that are clearly wrong, [like taking a verse aggressively out of context](#). But there are other kinds of bad readings, both more subtle and more damaging. Sometimes we can take a passage at surface value and use it in a way that is counter to the purposes of Jesus.

Satan does this in Matthew 4:6. **Merely quoting the Bible makes us no better than Satan.** We must not only quote it but understand it properly in the power of the Spirit, and then use it correctly.

Other examples of bad readings:

- **Prohibiting women from leadership based on 1 Timothy 2:11-12.**
  - This ignores important examples of women preachers and apostles.
  - It misunderstands the historical context where men were given more educational opportunities. [Here is a good essay on this passage that refocuses the issue on education rather than gender.](#)
  - **A better reading:** No one should be allowed to teach without proper training, education, and development.
- **Using various passages to support the transatlantic slave trade.**

- This ignores the trajectory of Scripture towards freedom and equitable relationships, even within slave-holding societies.
- **A better reading:** If we are to treat slaves as our brothers in Christ, abolition is the only path.

**Good Readings:** The above bad readings might make sense on a face-value reading, but ultimately are out of step with what the Holy Spirit wants. How do we ensure we are in line with the guidance of Jesus' Spirit? What are the elements of a 'good Bible reading'?

- Admit we are limited humans who might be wrong, but have decided to give our best to reading the Bible, living it out, and seeing what happens.
- Honor the text in both its line-by-line content and historical context.
- Consider other relevant passages.
- Test the spirits: *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."* (1 John 4:1)
- Done in community with historic Christianity, our current spiritual context, science, the best biblical scholarship, etc.
- Produce fruit: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."* (Galatians 5:22)

**Summary:** Taking the Bible very seriously, using the best exegetical tools available, and working in community, we test the 'spirit' of a reading to see if it produces the fruits of the Spirit. A good Bible reading is measured by its spiritual fruit.

Here is the bible reading formula we use at Dwell Church: We work hard to read the bible in its context so that it delivers the Fruit of the Spirit into our context.

## Part 2: Philosophy of Knowledge that Informs Bible Reading

I think this part works better as a video. Here are some resources:

- [Several resources from a class I taught on Deconstruction](#) (low production value - look for the 30-ish minute audio file)
- [A TLDR version](#) (somehow even lower production value)

**An STLDR (still too long; didn't read) Summary:** There was an old way of thinking that questioning a verse in the Bible meant you were questioning the whole Bible. This has secular philosophical roots that are 500 years old. A new way of thinking allows us to decouple one thought from the whole system to evaluate it. Rather than dishonoring the Bible, this approach arrives at better, more fruitful biblical readings since it gives us permission to give each belief maximum scrutiny without abandoning our core beliefs.

As an implication, this philosophical discussion helps make clear why human sexuality has moved towards the center of importance for evangelicals over my lifetime. It has become for them a proxy battle for the authority of Scripture. This thinking suggests that if we question the

passages about human sexuality, we are questioning the Bible itself. We need an approach to the Bible that lets us investigate any one passage without questioning the authority of the entire enterprise.

### **Part 3: Other Ways to Do This, and the Dwell Church Way**

There are several ways to arrive at an inclusive reading of Scripture. One approach is to simply state that exclusivist interpretations of Scripture bear no spiritual fruit (neither for queer people nor for cisgender people who hold this view). On those grounds alone, they can be rejected. While this is a valid approach, it is not the one we will be taking.

Another method is to consider the other prohibitions in Leviticus that we have largely ignored. The book of Leviticus contains 76 bans, some of which we have no intention of following. For instance, the prohibition against eating pork is widely disregarded—bacon is a popular food, and I myself enjoyed some for lunch today. Similarly, the ban on wearing clothing made of mixed fabrics is not something most of us consider; I appreciate a shirt that does not shrink in the dryer. We could argue that since we have decided many of these laws are optional, it is inconsistent to aggressively enforce some while ignoring others. On this basis alone, any exclusivist reading of Scripture could be deemed invalid.

The Bible's emphasis is another avenue. There are perhaps six to eight passages that seemingly apply to LGBTQ+ issues. In what follows, I will make the case that they do not. In contrast, there are over 2,000 verses that command us to care deeply for the poor in our community. Why did I never hear a sermon on that topic while growing up in the church? This disparity suggests that we have misplaced our focus. From a biblical perspective, one could argue that ignoring the six to eight passages and concentrating on the 2,000 would lead to a more biblically faithful life.

Finally, there is a clear emphasis on scripture for siding with the marginalized. This is thematic throughout, but is perhaps clearest in Matthew 25. There, Jesus says that he is mystically, sacramentally present among the 'least'. One could argue for inclusion simply on the grounds that, to fully include LGBTQ+ is aligned with feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, or visiting the incarcerated. These are reasonable grounds for full inclusion, but we will not build our argument there.

So, what is the Dwell approach? We are going to look directly at these passages and use what I will call conservative exegetical tools to analyze and understand them in new ways. In my biblical and theological training, I was taught a particular method of studying passages that evangelicals and conservatives tend to favor. This method involves examining the original language, its vocabulary and grammar, and the context of the passage and the book it is in. This is the fundamental way most pastors are trained, and it is the approach I will take today. We will drill down into the Hebrew and Greek as necessary, look deeply into the context, and arrive at an inclusive reading of Scripture.

### **Part 4: 6 Relevant Bible Passages on Human Sexuality**

The goal of this section is to evaluate Bible passages traditionally read as addressing contemporary issues of human sexuality. In addition to being measured by spiritual fruit, a good Bible reading makes the most sense of all the available data, including the text, its historical circumstance, and its context. The overall argument here is that at a minimum, based on standard exegetical work, there is not enough in these texts to stand against same-sex marriage.

### Gen 19: Sodom and Gomorrah

- *"But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.'"* (Genesis 19:4-5)
- *"This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it."* (Ezekiel 16:49-50)

**Analysis:** This passage, read in its ancient context, is about hospitality and the rejection of the stranger, expressed through the threat of violent gang rape. Richard Hays, a moderate scholar who formerly sided against an affirming LGBTQ+ view before changing his mind, comments:

"The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic... there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgement about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse... In fact, the clearest statement about the sin of Sodom is to be found in an oracle of the prophet Ezekiel: 'This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.'" - *Moral Vision of the NT*, Richard Hays

### Leviticus 18 and 20: Levitical Law

- 18:22 *"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."*
- 20:13 *"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."*

**Analysis:** The Hebrew does not definitively support the common English translation; the context supports other interpretations, namely those concerning idolatrous incest or cultic prostitution.

- Several compelling reasons to think this passage is about incest
  - There are two Hebrew words in this passage that are translated 'man' - *ʾīš* and *zākār*. Some translations render this 'man' and 'male'. Others, somewhat disingenuously, render them as the same word in English (NIV). But *zākār* can also mean 'male child' as in Genesis 17:10, which would make this passage about pederasty or incest. It is important to note exactly how *zākār* and *īš* relate.

The former can be rendered in English as 'male', of any kind and age. It is the broader category. While *ʾiš* is an adult of the *zākār*. Further, *zākār* has the undertone of 'male heir' or descendent. So how does one know what kind of *zākār* - adult, child, or otherwise? Context indicates what sub-set of *zākār*. Here it is at least plausible that it indicates a younger male.

- Another translation difficulty is how to render *mishkave isha* 'the layings of a woman'. It is often translated 'as with a woman', but this is an aggressive transliteration designed to clarify the confusing Hebrew. This is a confusing bit of Hebrew because there are several other ways to convey sex. Meanwhile this phrase only occurs three times in the Old Testament. Here in Lev. 18 and 20, and Genesis 49. Because context is the primary conveyer of meaning, having too few contexts to consider means we cannot know for certain what this phrase means. [Here is a primer on words with too few contexts to discern meaning.](#) I want to suggest that too much is at stake in this conversation to make this passage a load-bearing passage. On these grounds alone, we can reject the exclusivist passage.
- In Genesis 49 the story is also about incest, suggesting *mishkave isha* is a phrase with an exploitative family relationship in view.
- These textual clues that point to incest might be red herrings without this final element - the immediate texts (Lev 20:10-15) are also largely about incest.
- Two textual clues plus the surrounding context make for a pretty sound reading that this is about incest.
- **Covenantal Fidelity:** While incest is of course evil and wrong, it is situated here within the context of faithfulness to Yahweh's covenant. Lev 18:15 - *The Lord said to Moses, 2 "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the Lord your God. 3 You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. 4 You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. 5 Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.*
- **Analysis:** The underlying value of covenantal fidelity is what all the prohibitions in Lev 18 have in common. Further, when we change the interpretive frame away from heteronormativity to covenantal fidelity, the problematic Hebrew falls into place (*mishkave isha*), prohibiting exploitative relationships. **There is a strong argument to be made here that the value being expressed is covenantal fidelity, not heteronormativity.**

## Romans 1: The Guilt of All Humankind

- The passage describes people who "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" and "exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural." It lists these and other actions, concluding in 2:1: *"Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." This builds towards Paul's famous edict in Romans 3: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*

**Analysis:** Paul is using a rhetorical device to convince the Jewish element of the very diverse Roman Church that they are no better than the worst of the Gentiles—in their view, lustful idolaters. The point is that all have fallen short and need grace. At best, this passage isn't helpful in contemporary discussions of LGBTQ+ issues. At worst, it's a harmful misuse of a passage that is clearly about something else.

- **Context:** The Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome and returned to find their home church had become 'too Gentile.' Paul is urging grace-based unity.
- **Rhetorical Target:** Homosexuality and idol worship are used in a rhetorical way to emphasize that all humans are guilty before God. It is really important to honor that gay people are not the target audience of this passage. Judgmental people are.
- **A reasonable question emerges:** doesn't this passage indicate Paul thought of homosexuality as a sin? Interestingly, that isn't the logic of the passage—the sin is idolatry, and the *consequence* is the behavior listed. One might dismiss an exclusivist reading solely on the grounds that idol worship is in view here, not same-sex relationships. Furthermore, Paul seems to be paraphrasing the arguments of his audience, only to turn the tables on them in 2:1. What is clear from the passage is that (some of) Paul's audience thinks this, more so than Paul. However, Paul also seems to have at times justified slavery, and (seemingly) been against women in leadership in certain specific circumstances. So even if Paul did think of same-sex relationships as something to be rejected, that isn't determinative. There are grounds elsewhere in scripture to side for inclusion, and there are reasons to think this passage doesn't apply. Namely, to deploy this passage against gay marriage is to use it in a way that it very much was not intended.

### 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10

- These passages list various wrongdoers, including the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. These are sometimes said to refer to same-sex relationships.

**Analysis:** The words in use here are very rare in the ancient world and therefore very hard to define with certainty. The best guess, however, is that they refer to male prostitutes, their patrons (often in exploitative pederastic relationships), and the slave-traders who make the arrangement possible; not to loving, consensual same-sex relationships.

- Conservative scholar Gordon Fee notes that *malakoi* could refer to the "passive" partner in a pederastic relationship, but "one cannot be sure what it means in a list like this."
- He says *arsenokoitai* is also difficult, as this is its first known appearance in literature.
- Scholar Stanley Grenz notes that in 1 Timothy, *arsenokoitai* is juxtaposed with words for fornicators and slave-traders, suggesting a context of prostitution and exploitation.

### Jude 6-7

- *"And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness... In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion."*



**Analysis:** This is an obscure reference to angels and humans having sexual relations. New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine offers this: "The text has nothing to do with homosexuality." For Jude, the issue is divine-human coupling, which is contrary to nature.

**Conclusion:** The case against same-sex relationships is weaker than assumed upon inspection. None of these passages clearly and cleanly have same-sex covenantal relationships in view. Instead, a better explanation of the data exists. Because God celebrates covenantal fidelity as a core biblical principle, we can too. Thus an affirming and inclusive stance is a reasonable conclusion.

## Part 5: Relevant Science

The goal of this section is to offer some research-based approaches to human sexuality that can and should inform our understanding. Listening to and deploying science in a discerning way is part of loving God with our minds.

- [Over 1,000 animal species have been observed to exhibit homosexual behavior.](#)
- Since 1948, it's been a best practice to think of human sexuality as a set of spectrums rather than rigid categories (e.g., [the Kinsey Scale](#)).
- [Sexual Configurations Theory](#) updates this understanding across several axes and is an empirically based standard in the field.
- The [causes of sexual orientation](#) are complex and understood to have a genetic component.

**Conclusion:** Traditional stances on homosexuality (that it's a culpable choice) are unhelpful and inconsistent with the scientific data. We need a biblical sexual ethic that fruitfully addresses real-life human sexuality.

## Part 6: Acts Chapter 15

Yesterday (6.8.25) was Pentecost Sunday, which commemorates the moment Jesus sent his Spirit to dwell in the hearts of his followers. At the first Pentecost, as Peter was preaching a great sermon, the Spirit of Jesus suddenly arrived, and everyone present heard the sermon in their own native language. It was a powerfully inclusive moment in the story of the Church. This event, however, caused some tension. In Acts chapter 15, the leaders of the early church convened the Jerusalem Council to address a critical question: "Are we going to let all these Gentiles into this Jewish movement that follows Jesus?" Their ultimate realization was that the Spirit of Jesus already dwelled within the Gentiles.

In what is one of the most remarkable passages in the Bible, they famously concluded, "It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us to include them." Part of what this passage means is that the community has a voice in these matters. But more importantly, it signifies that people in whom we can recognize the Spirit of Jesus are *already in*. They are already part of the team; we are just the slow ones catching up to that reality.

As I reflect on my own journey, I have known many amazing queer individuals who were deeply kind and brave, and from whom I learned so much about following Jesus. Therefore, it is easy for me to say that we must include anyone who is full of the Spirit of Jesus. **On those grounds alone, we must be part of an inclusive movement. To do otherwise is to reject the promptings and the leadings of Jesus's Spirit itself.**

One possible objection to this argument voiced by Preston Sprinkle (more on him below) is that the Jerusalem Council accepted gentile inclusion on the condition that they abstain from “sexual immorality” or in the greek, *pornea*. Sprinkle gives a maximalist interpretation that includes same-sex marriage. The history of this word is helpful. In the NT at least, it primarily signifies incest (see 1 Cor 5:1). In Acts 15, the context is self-evidently activity associated with idolatry. Thus, covenantal fidelity is again the value expressed. To expand the meaning of *pornea* beyond these uses to include equitable and covenantal same-sex relationships is an interpretive decision at best. To depict it as a normal use of that word is without defense.

## Part 7: Covenant Fidelity and the end of the Story

First, [I'd like to offer this](#): a fair-minded person could view these passages, account for the same elements, and come to the opposite conclusions. I've made strong arguments, particularly on Leviticus, but these passages are hard to interpret. We must proceed with humility, while still arriving at a firm position that helps us live life.

Secondly, Paul, along with the authors of the other passages, probably had a negative view of homosexuality. But, equally, we cannot know if that was due to its common association in that day with idolatry, exploitation, and temple prostitution.

Here is what we do not have: a clear set of passages condemning consenting, monogamous, life-long homosexual partnerships. What we do have are some very difficult passages written in a very different context. Here is what else we do not have: a clear mandate to approve of homosexual unions (as they are a modern invention), at least not in a single, direct passage.

So what are we to do?

My first suggestion is to celebrate the sanctity of marriage, in all its forms, through **covenant fidelity**. There is one thing all the passages under review in Part 4 have in common. They are all, at their core, about violations of God's covenant through idolatry, exploitation, and injustice. Marriage is a sacred entity that images God's covenant with us. The *form* of marriage is cultural (the Bible includes polygamy and other forms strange to us), but its *essence* is covenant. In Paul's day, homosexuality was culturally associated with idolatry. In our day, it can be culturally associated with covenantal fidelity, and therefore affirmed.

My second suggestion addresses Paul's trajectory. There is enough ambiguity in each passage that they simply don't have the power to obstruct gay marriage or affirming churches. It was left to the church to tease out the most Christlike position on issues like women in leadership and slavery. We are part of that story. Like brave women leaders and abolitionists of their day, it is up to us to discern the most Christ-honoring way to proceed.



In conclusion, I think we have ample grounds to establish a joyful, affirming view based on the Bible's trajectory towards justice and its larger emphasis on Covenantal Fidelity.

## Part 8: A Response to Preston Sprinkle

I want to take a closer look at the work of Preston Sprinkle, who has done important work to navigate this argument into kinder waters. Let us consider two of his stronger arguments from his book *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?*

First, he argues that marriage requires sex difference by definition. He suggests this difference is essential for how marriage symbolically points to God's union with creation and is "woven into the fabric of creation."

**My response:** I have suggested that covenantal fidelity, not heteronormativity, flows from God's heart. From this point of view, the idea that 'sex difference is woven into the fabric of creation' appears to be a category confusion. He is taking something descriptive and making it prescriptive. A **descriptive** statement explains *what is*, simply reporting an observation or fact about the world. A **prescriptive** statement dictates *what ought to be*, issuing a rule or recommendation for how someone should act. Genesis is written to the vast majority of the population, who are heterosexual; we shouldn't expect a poem about creation to list every possible permutation. It is important to meet the bible on its own terms, and that includes genre. Because Gen 1 is designed as a poem with a specific theological perspective (God is good, and he made his creation so), to move beyond it is an unhelpful, or possibly irresponsible reading of scripture.

Sprinkle wisely anticipates this and argues that Genesis 2:24 ("a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife") is a shift from descriptive to prescriptive. I say this with sincerity: maybe he is smarter than me, but I fail to see how this functions as prescriptive. There doesn't seem to be a 'should' here. He also points to Jesus quoting Genesis in Matthew 19, but the main thrust of that passage is about covenantal fidelity in divorce, not gender essentialism. His argument also becomes inconsistent when he rightly affirms singlehood, which would seem to contradict the idea that heterosexual marriage is a universal prescription "woven into creation." To argue that Gen 2:24 is prescriptive for heteronormativity, but not for marriage, seems to me to be selective prescriptivity.

Second, Sprinkle argues that while there is a biblical trajectory towards justice for women and slaves (with some passages showing female leadership and favoring abolition), no such passage exists for LGBTQ+ inclusion.

**My response:** While I think it is a strong argument, I disagree. I think Romans 2:1 is just such a passage. It is the incipient beginning of a trajectory that flows through history—through Sprinkle himself developing a kinder conversation—and ultimately to full inclusion.

**Finally, his project fails on one important account:** he is unable to name or demonstrate a single harm associated with gay marriage. If it were the problem he outlines, there would be

some demonstrable harm. Instead, we see gay people in deep, loving, transformative, and godly marriages. We measure things by their fruit.

## **Part 9: TLDR**

Putting all this together, the Bible mentions covenantal fidelity at least 315 times quite clearly, while there are only six very cloudy verses that might be used to oppose an affirming view. When we take the 'human sexuality' belief out for scrutiny, we find that the passages in question fit better within the frame of covenantal fidelity. An affirming view makes sense of the science and produces the fruits of the Spirit (whose marriage hasn't prayerfully nudged them towards love, joy, and peace?). We can be confident in an affirming view that retains a belief that sex is best within marriage, while asking the important question of the cost of wrongly deploying those six passages to harm our neighbor instead of loving them.