

A GUIDING LETTER

*to the Heartland community
regarding our heart
toward LGBTQ&A¹ people*

by Dan Deeble

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¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning or Asexual. We will refer to these going forward as “LGBTQ+”.

Humanly, we all share the desire to become whole. We are all seeking to become more fully human, a more integrated self, and completely free at our deepest core. This, of course, transcends questions of sexuality and begs the largest questions in life.

My specific intent in this “Guiding Letter” is to address the question of same-sex relationships. The challenge before us, though, is bigger than that. We must think both expansively and personally about the true nature of things like sin, love, and redemption for us all. My deepest heart, then, is to provoke us all to ask: *“Do I really believe in the power of Jesus to heal, transform, and redeem all of who I am – to make me whole again?”*

Before moving on, though, let me cut to the chase:

- We want LGBTQ+ people of all expressions to call Heartland their spiritual home.
- We don’t believe the practice of same-gender sex reflects God’s very best for us.

Welcome to the beautiful and messy tension of being the church of Jesus.

Now before I go a second further, I want to acknowledge a few things.

First, what I have just written may land in a very tender or confusing place. Some within our community are in a same-sex relationship; others are struggling with their sexual identity. Some of us have children and family members who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community and nearly all of us – in one capacity or another – are friends with someone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or asexual. And many of them are our dearest friends, favorite co-workers, and best neighbors.

Secondly, let me tell you what I do not believe. I don’t believe that all LGBTQ+ people have chosen this life. I do not believe that their attraction is always the result of abuse or excessive pornography. All the available research I’ve seen points towards a variety of factors that include both nature and nurture influences. So when someone tells me that they were ‘made this way,’ I believe them. I also don’t believe the gay lifestyle is just about sex. For many this is more about companionship, affection, and meaningful relationship with another human being. Finally, I don’t believe that a practicing LGBTQ+ is instantly disqualified from heaven. If someone tells me that they love Jesus, I start by believing them.

Thirdly, I would like to be wrong. I wish I could say that same-gender sex is okay but I simply cannot.² No one wants to be on the wrong side of culture – let alone history. And it’s important to remember that - throughout history and across a spectrum of issues – culture has been wrong at times. The church has also been wrong at times. And, perhaps most disastrously, both church and culture have at times been wrong together. So logically it follows that I could be wrong too. The Bible says that Truth gets foggy for everyone this side of heaven (*see 1 Corinthians 13:12*).

Having said that, we are each responsible to pursue what’s true and right. To suggest otherwise is intellectually untenable. So I offer this guiding letter to our leadership *community* as a reflection of my study, prayer, and experience – however imperfect and flawed it may be. At the same time, I *personally* commit to live in the tension of being both deeply convicted and continually pursuant of greater revelation.

Lastly, this letter doesn’t speak for everyone. There are many different perspectives within our church – including among our staff and elders. So for those who may not *hold* to every specific of this perspective, I simply ask that they *honor* it. And, fortunately, *uniformity* and *unity* are not always the same thing. We’re seeking Biblical unity together and we’re doing it as a family (*see Philippians 2:1-2*). If you think about it, families rarely 100% agree. At least, healthy ones don’t.

² I suppose this is the difference between having a *conviction* versus just having a *preference*.

So to conclude:

- This conversation isn't theoretical. It's personal and it really, really matters.
 - This is not an "us versus them" question. In more ways than one, it's about us.
 - This is not a problem to be solved. It is an opportunity to love.
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How To Approach This Conversation:

The biggest question we must ask is not "What's your position on...?" or "What side do you agree with...?". The question is simply and always this: "What does love require?" But in order to answer that, we must first define what love is.

I suggest to you that love is more robust than acceptance, sturdier than emotion, and grittier than tolerance. I firmly believe that love is best defined as the full presence and practice of grace and truth.³

Fortunately, we see and experience this modeled through Jesus who is described as being "*full of grace and truth*" (see *John 1:14*). And we see this perfect combination throughout His every interaction. He was, if you will, both tough on crime and scandalous with grace. To the woman caught in adultery He said both, "Who here condemns you?" and "Go and sin no more" (see *John 8:10-11*). To the paralytic, He forgave his sins and then He healed his body (see *Mark 2:1-12*). To the outcast woman in Samaria, He called her out for her many husbands and then made her the town's heroine (see *John 4:1-42*).

In other words, He was the fullness of love in the flesh (*1 John 4:16*).

As followers of Jesus, we too must love this way. When we fail to love as Jesus did, however, it can often express itself through two painful extremes:

- *If we give all truth but lack grace*, then we will condemn everyone and position ourselves as the moral police through a shame-based approach. This is not love.
- *If we give all grace but lack truth*, then we will condone everything – enabling others to live outside of God's best and practicing a confused compassion. This too is not love.

Truth without grace becomes toxic.

Grace without truth has no power.

*But: grace + truth = love.*⁴

Love finds its greatest and fullest expression, however, at the intersection of full truth and full grace. To live into this – especially *with* those we disagree with, with those who oppose us, and even with someone in the wrong – THAT is where love finds its greatest power.

Consider the cross (see *Romans 5:8-11*).

In that spirit, I want to lay out a few ground rules. No matter what you may think about this topic, I want to ask that we agree on a few principles going forward:

³ This section is best explained visually through a whiteboard – [watch it HERE](#).

⁴ For the sake of objectivity, it might be helpful to read these questions through a different lens. Think, for example, of what's required to love in any relationship (i.e. peer to peer, sibling to sibling, etc.).

1. That love distinguishes between “acceptance” and “approval.” Is it possible that you can accept me for who I am, but – in love – not approve of the choices I make?
2. That love is not necessarily “agreement” but, in fact, can sometimes be best expressed through disagreement, if not appropriate challenge?
3. That love can distinguish between disagreement and separateness – meaning, can we disagree and still belong, one to another?

Fair?

Why Do We Need To Address This?

We have never been an issues-driven church, but have sought to be an essentials-grounded church. The following ancient phrase forms our theological ethos: *“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.”*⁵ Thus, we do have those things that we will die on the hill for but the good news is that it’s a very short list so that we can maintain a singular focus on Jesus and being a church for the unchurched. ([Read more about our essential beliefs HERE.](#))

This does not mean, however, that we won’t seek to offer a biblical perspective on relevant and controversial issues. It might be helpful to remember the many topics that we’ve addressed in sermons and other ministry venues through the years – politics, greed & materialism, divorce, sexual abuse, pornography, environmentalism, and hell to name a few. None of these topics are listed in our essential list of beliefs. But we address them to help us apply our essential beliefs into our real and every day lives.⁶

So this is *not* without precedent and it is profoundly needed. Here’s why:

1. **Culturally, this is different.** The energy and confusion surrounding these questions is unparalleled in its power and without its influential equal in today’s society. While I have no interest in joining the ‘culture war’, I am passionate about our church developing greater ability and fluency to thoughtfully engage in dominant cultural conversations like this – in a way that’s redemptive, and not reactive.
2. **Biblically, this is a watershed issue.** No matter how you look at it, biblical relevancy and fidelity are ultimately at stake. How the Bible gets interpreted, dismissed, or leveraged on either side of the debate has the potential to undermine its authority in our lives and, in effect, do great harm to others. In this respect, I believe that this conversation will be a defining one for many other issues to come after it.
3. **Clarity is needed.** I feel the strong need to provide leadership clarity into the confusion that swirls around us. On this issue, I think it’s safe to assume that as a church community we’re all over the map. For example, generationally there is a great divide. Many among the older generations consider this issue to be THE PROBLEM whereas many in the younger generations don’t see it as a problem at all. Both perspectives, I believe, are problematic.

⁵ Source unknown, though credited to Augustine (354-430 AD).

⁶ In the case of divorce and remarriage, for example, we offer a position paper to help people navigate the deeply personal and challenging teachings of Scripture. [See that HERE.](#)

But what is most problematic is not talking about it at all. Because here's the irony: by not talking about it, we actually *are* talking about it – but letting *others* choose (and interpret) our words for us. As one young man who blogged about his struggle growing up as a gay adolescent at Heartland wrote, “...*the lack of discussion was damning enough.*”

Ambiguity will not serve us well nor can silence be our best way to express love. Everyone deserves the dignity of knowing these convictions upfront and we all deserve to experience His love throughout.

Rest assured, this issue will not be our new cause or campaign either. We are a church for the unchurched. This will not change. We exist for those far from God, from all fringes and spectrums – and that, of course, includes those within the LGBTQ+ community.

I pray, then, that this letter serves as a clarifying guide so that we can *celebrate* the many that I hope will call Heartland their home while we seek to be faithful to our biblical convictions. We must tell the truth in love, yes, but not because we think it's our job to change people (*see Ephesians 4:15*). It is not. God is the only one who restores; who can make broken things whole; who makes beauty from ash.

Our job, Church, is to simply...
follow Jesus together,
yield to His repurposing power,
make space for others,
pursue love and
join Him.

Establishing a Biblical Worldview:

I wrote in my opening that same-gender sex does not reflect God's very best for our lives. Now, let me unpack this statement a bit:

Let's first begin with the Bible itself. We believe that the Bible is the infallible word of God – which means that it is without error in all matters that God intends to speak.⁷ And, as it turns out, the Bible does tackle these questions. Broadly, sexual dysfunction⁸ of all varieties is a common issue addressed by the biblical writers – not because they were prudish or priggish but because our sexuality is awesome and it deserves a fuller vision and advocacy. Specifically, the writers do not address the practice of same-gender sex nearly as much as greed or materialism, mind you, but in enough places (six, in fact)⁹ and with a compelling clarity to get our attention.

I do not intend in this letter, however, to specifically unpack each of the six passages but, instead, I hope to apply a biblical framework (or narrative theology) that can carry the conversation forward.^{10 11}

Next, let's briefly ask about God and the question of His purposes. Do we believe that there is inherent design and intention behind all that we are and will become? This runs the risk of a rabbit trail, I know, but it's important – because if we don't believe in God or that He cares, then the point is moot. To each his own. However, if there is a God who does care, who wants us to flourish, and offers us the best path to do so...then we had better spend some time *at least* exploring what that is.

Now, let's talk about us: as we explore His original design and redemptive purposes, we'll find that our bodies, souls, desires, and sexuality have profound meaning. We will also discover important implications for our relationships, our self-worth, and what it means to be whole. In essence, the Bible offers us both a simple and comprehensive answer to a complex, anthropological question: *"What does it mean to be human?"*

In its first three chapters, the Bible provides two core descriptions of our humanity:

- (1) We are all **beautiful** because we are made in the image of God (*Genesis 1:27*).
- (2) We are all **broken** because of sin (*Genesis 3:1-19*).

Practically and empirically, don't we know these descriptions of our humanity to be true? Consider air travel. We board these steel contraptions and trust that we will be safely lifted above the clouds and transported over thousands of miles. Why? Because we trust in the beauty of human's ingenuity and creativity. That's the beautiful image of God upon us. And, yet, we also force every human being to endure an X-ray scan before they can board. Why? Because we believe that anyone and everyone is capable of blowing it up. That's sin and being thoroughly broken! We see these themes playing out everyday in our world and I see it playing out personally in my very own heart. As a therapist masterfully told me, *"Dan, you are a good person – except for when you are not."*

⁷ For an explanation of how we believe this to be true, [check out our sermon series called "Source" HERE](#).

⁸ The Greek word is "pornea," and it is a general, all-encompassing term that is often translated as "sexual immorality."

⁹ 1) Genesis 19, 2) Leviticus 18:22, 3) Leviticus 20:13, 4) Romans 1:24-27, 5) 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 6) 1 Timothy 1:8-11

¹⁰ An additional reason for this approach is to address the popular argument that these six biblical passages only refer to issues of sexual abuse, pederasty, etc. and thereby do not condemn consensual and committed same-sex relationships. While I understand the reasoning of this argument, it remains largely unconvincing – in part because of the specific passages themselves but also because of the larger, over-arching biblical narrative I've attempted to outline here.

¹¹ [See our "Learning Plan" syllabus HERE](#) for both "historic" and "alternative" interpretations of these specific passages.

Based upon this understanding, let me draw a few core convictions about you, me and all of us together.

1. We all deserve 100% dignity as an image bearer of God.

Read Genesis 1:27 and Psalm 139 – it’s true for you and for me. Period. This means that we all deserve basic human rights and civil protection. Anything short of that or against that is biblical injustice. Victims should be advocated for and systems of injustice should be fought against. Determining what those rights are is a very complicated, messy matter and each Christ follower should have the freedom to specifically discern what biblical justice requires. But suffice it to say that if we are endowed with inalienable rights by our Creator – as our Declaration of Independence decrees – then life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness should be bound to and defined by God’s expressed design and intent.¹²

2. Our bodies matter and our sexuality is good.

God designed us as whole human beings – souls *and* bodies – and called us “very good” (*Genesis 1:31*). In the very beginning, the only thing that God called “not good” was that man was alone and had no other human being with whom to share in life (*Genesis 2:18*). So God created another human but, ingeniously, not one just like him. He created one *from* him but *not identical* to him. And it’s in this design and distinction that His reflected image was made complete: “*So God created man in His own image,...male and female He created them*” (*Genesis 1:27*).

Thus, even our bodies have in themselves purpose and meaning. So does our sexuality. He created us with anatomical distinction that, when connected through sexual union, male and female become one. This marriage of body and soul was designed by God to be a complementary, beautiful union – both a celebration of our gender’s “otherness” and a completion of God’s image reflected through us together.

3. We are more than our bodies & our sexuality.

Tim Keller, a pastor and author in Manhattan, New York, was once asked if practicing homosexuals were going to hell. I love his response: “*First of all, heterosexuality does not get you to heaven. I happen to know this. So how in the world could homosexuality send you to hell?*”¹³

In order to get to our core identity, we have to go deeper. All too often this conversation starts at the symptomatic level (*i.e. “What does it mean to be a LGBTQ+ person?” etc.*) and not at the root (*i.e. “What is my identity as a human being?”*). Our sexuality is extremely important but it is not the most important thing about us. It is not the deepest part of who we are. Despite the deafening mantra of our western culture, we are more than our sexuality, we are human beings.

Throughout history and most certainly now, the Church has exacerbated this unhealthy emphasis by not giving honor to the single individuals in our midst. We often treat them as not fully matured or, worse, as second-class citizens (*i.e. How many times have you ever thought about a 35 year-old single “What’s wrong with him?” How many lead pastors do you know that are single?*).

Not only is that not fair, it’s not biblical.

¹² For example, hate crimes are horrific and injurious to a person’s dignity and humanity. All people’s physical safety should be legally protected. On the other hand, I do not believe that marriage is a civil rights issue. Marriage does not make one fully human and not everyone is legally able to marry in our society (e.g. a 12-year old can’t get married, siblings cannot marry, nor can a single person marry himself – as silly as that may sound).

¹³ Watch this Tim Keller video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTwugmG4hoA>

The Bible calls the single life a “gift of grace” and, in fact, the preferred choice for a Christ follower. This is because the single life allows for undivided devotion to the Lord – as demonstrated by the Apostle Paul, many of the disciples, and others (see *1 Corinthians 7:1, 7, & 32-35*).

The single life was also modeled by Jesus – who was also single, sexual and abstinent. Let us never forget that, in Him, we see the most complete human being; the “blueprint of our true selves.”¹⁴

4. We all share an equality of brokenness.

The Bible says “*There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*” (see *Romans 3:22-23*).

I believe that this all comes as a consequence of decisions made in Genesis 3. Because of humanity’s rebellion in the garden, sin has permeated down to our bones. Now, we all experience distortion and disorder in every area of our lives – through our desires, in our bodies and our minds, and right down to our sexuality. We believe that same-gender sex is one of many expressions of that shared brokenness.

In the eyes of God, all sin is the same. Do they vary in their natural consequences? Of course. But every sin is a distortion of God’s best design for our lives. On this point, Jesus throws us all under the bus. In Mark 7:20-23, Jesus rattles off an interesting list of sins: “...*evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly*” (see verse 21-22).

Pretty comprehensive, huh? He doesn’t cover every sin, but He does cover *everyone*. Who can escape it? Not me. Evil thoughts? *Check*. Deceit? *Check*. Lewdness? Envy? Arrogance? Folly? *Check, check, check, and check*.

In the original Greek, the word for “sexual immorality” is “*porneia*” and it means “*a sexual sin of a general kind, that includes many different behaviors.*” It means any kind of sexual activity outside the covenantal marriage lines between a man and woman. When I was young(er), single, and burning with pent-up sexual energy I remember asking a pastor friend of mine: “*Jesus doesn’t actually speak against sex before marriage does He?*” I was looking for a loophole. He was a hip pastor to boot – one that I could trust to not just quote the party line. He looked at me and said squarely, “*Actually, Jesus does.*” Then he pointed out Mark 7:21 and the word “*porneia.*” Dang.

In her coming-to-Jesus memoir, Rosaria Champagne-Butterfield writes: “...*my sexuality was sinful not because it was lesbian per se but because it wasn’t Christ-controlled. My heterosexual past was no more sanctified than my homosexual present.*”¹⁵

Thus, the *practice of same-gendered sex* is the same as all other sins and therefore should be viewed similarly.

More to the point, I might phrase it this way:

- The practice of same-gender sex is a sin.
- So too is the practice of greed, pride, gossip, and not loving a LGBTQ+ person. And we – the church – have sinned much.¹⁶

Now if you self-identify as an LGBTQ+ person, however, I suspect that this perspective is hurtful to you still. Most other sins seem to be described as *behavior*, whereas you might view your sexual orientation as part of your *person*; as someone God designed this way as a part of His perfect creation. Thus, you might say, I have not only called your behavior “bad,” but I have called *you* “bad.” I am truly sorry if it has landed this way with you. It’s important to

¹⁴ [“Transformation of Persons with Same-Sex Attraction: Becoming Who We Are”](#) by the Restored Hope Network

¹⁵ From the book [The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into Christian Faith](#) by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield

¹⁶ I wonder what it would look like for us to repent first...

acknowledge, then, that this is where the conversation gets stuck. Theologically speaking, whether same-sex attraction is originally intended by God (a reflection of His work in Genesis 1 & 2) or whether it is a consequence of sin (as recorded in Genesis 3) is the absolute crux of the matter within the Western Church. That said, my intention is to simply illustrate our equality of brokenness and let's remember – as David Gushee puts it so succinctly: *“Nobody has Genesis 1-2 sexuality.”*¹⁷

I love how Andy Crouch describes our uniform sexual distortion: *“Every one of us is a member of the coalition of human beings who feel out of place in our bodies east of Eden. And every one of us has fallen far short of honoring God and other human beings with our bodies. This is especially grievously so in a culture saturated with pornography, which threatens to make sexual gnostics of us all, chasing ecstasy further and further afield from the dignity and limits of bodies, male and female, given in covenant love.”*¹⁸

5. Our desires shouldn't have the final word.

We live in a culture that – emotionally and sexually speaking – is stuck in middle school. We're offered a decision-making grid for our life's choices that has been reduced to phrases like, *“If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad”* or *“Follow your heart”* or *“Why not? It's not hurting anyone else.”* The crazy thing, is that it does. When we follow this grid, it leads to all sorts of sadness and hurt. Crazy still, we repeat it again in the hopes of a better outcome. Even worse, we mock anyone who dare suggest another way.

We have to acknowledge that our brokenness goes all the way down into our heart, desires, and impulses. The Bible says that our heart is desperately sick and that not even Jesus fully entrusted Himself to us because of it (*see Jeremiah 17:9 & John 2:24-25*).

So, neither should we trust our desires as the best and only barometer for healthy life choices.

The Apostle Paul writes that some of our desires are *“...connected with that way of death: sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That's a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God”* (*see Colossians 3:5-8, The Message*).

Our desires are important, of course. They're real, important, and not all of them are bad. In fact, if appropriately explored, desires can be helpful to diagnose what's happening within our complex souls. They can help us identify our deepest needs that are, at their core, satisfied by God himself and the community of believers He surrounds us with (*see Psalm 103:5*). But our desires shouldn't rule over us. They should not be considered synonymous with what's true or right. They should not be our trump card for selfishness (*see Romans 13:11-14, James 1:13-15*).

Nor, incidentally, should our desires be reason for shame.

To be very clear: I do not believe that having an attraction, desire, or temptation of any kind is itself a sin. It's what we do with our desires – internally or externally – that matters. If, for example, you have a broken impulse to look at pornography. Is that sin? No. Choosing to act on it is. Similarly, having same-sex attraction is not in itself a sin, acting on it is.

With all of our desires – good or bad – we have to hold each of them up to God and pray like Jesus, *“Father...not my will, but yours be done”* (*see Luke 22:42*).

¹⁷ [“Creation, sexual orientation, and God's will: The LGBT issue”](#) – from a series of articles by David Gushee for BaptistNews.com

¹⁸ [“Sex Without Bodies”](#) – a Christianity Today editorial by Andy Crouch

6. We share a common need for restoration.

God fully loves us and He wants to fully restore us.

Now, from here I believe are two divergent errors. One, is when the church tries to play the role of God and enforce change upon others. That's not restoration. It's manipulation or coercion or just simply trying too hard.

The second error is when our culture treats love and restoration as mutually exclusive. *"If you fully loved me,"* they say, *"Then you wouldn't want to change me!"* or *"How dare you say you love me but that I'm not okay just the way that I am?"*

This is a false dichotomy. It's not an either/or. It is a both/and. We ask our doctors to tell us when we're not okay and we ask the same of our teachers, coaches, and structural engineers. And if it's true and done in grace, then it may be a hard message but it's the right one. It is an act of love.

Why, then, do we think it should be any different with a loving God?

You see, this is where our story connects with His story in the person of Jesus.

- Jesus' *birth* reminds us that there's a reason He came (our brokenness) and that God has never given up on us (our beauty).
- Jesus' *life* shows us the heart of God and the best way to live.
- Jesus' *death* offers us grace & tells us that all can be forgiven.
- Jesus' *resurrection* shows us "God's purpose and power to restore His creation to its full stature and integrity."¹⁹
- Jesus sent us the *Holy Spirit* who heals, transforms, comforts, & can make us whole.
- Jesus' future *return* gives us hope that He will one day – physically and literally – come back as Lord to restore all things.

And our story begins to join His story at the point of...*repentance*.

Repentance is the response God asks of each of us. When He calls us to repent He is, in essence, saying, *"I love you. And I want you with me. Just turn around."*²⁰

So we must drop the bad preacher drawl or placard-holding, bigoted voice in our heads and replace it with the tone of a Father in heaven who loves us, whose *"kindness leads [us] to repentance"* (see *Romans 2:4*). Kindness!!! Need I say it again? Kindness!!! Not ridicule, not condemnation, and never patronizing – for THAT is where the church gets stuck in middle school! But kindness – the fierce, unrelenting, and compelling invitation from a Father in heaven who wants us home. And when we turn to Him, He takes us just as we are and our lives are eternally changed.

¹⁹ as quoted in ["Transformation of Persons with Same-Sex Attraction: Becoming Who We Are"](#)

²⁰ The verb for 'to repent' in the Greek is 'metanoēō' and it means in its most basic definition 'to change one's mind' with a practical emphasis on 'turning around.'

Now, one might ask: *“If that’s true, then why all the fuss?”*

There is a distinction between needing Jesus as our “Savior” and following Him as our “Lord”:

- **Jesus as our Savior:** when we give our lives to Jesus, He promises to save us from the eternal consequences of our sins. Because of Jesus’ death on the cross, we are redeemed. We are forgiven, once and for all. God no longer sees us as sinners because our sins have been atoned for. Thus – by grace alone – our **position** changes instantly and forever as we are in “right-standing” before a just and merciful God. Theologians call this “being justified” (see *Romans 3:22-26, Ephesians 2:1-9, & 2 Corinthians 5:17*).
- **Jesus as our Lord:** when we give our lives to Jesus, we also commit to follow Him as Lord. This means that we make Him our highest allegiance, our loudest voice, & the greatest influence in our lives. This is a spirit-led **process** of becoming like Him. It is a journey and it’s not instantaneous. It’s messy. It’s three steps forward, two back. It’s filled with detours and back-alleys. But it always requires our cooperation, our obedience, and our continual response to the ever-unfolding story of God’s love (see *Philippians 1:6, 3:7-16, 1 John 2:5-6*).

In terms of restoration, then, our core humanity is most recovered in this confession:

“Christ is Lord.”

Now, nobody can do that for us and it certainly should never be forced upon us! We have to make the choice for ourselves because the hope of our full restoration lies in our ability to daily make this turn – to walk in the light, confess our sins, and *“in {our} hearts set apart Christ as Lord”* (see *1 John 1:5-10; 1 Peter 3:15*).

I believe that our fidelity to Jesus as Lord over cultural influence, personal preference, et al is most at stake in this conversation. It is also most at stake in our own spiritual lives because, at some point, our inability to surrender everything to Him will work against His very best purposes for us:

“May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he’ll do it!” (see *1 Thessalonians 5:23, The Message*).

What This Means For Our Church:

All of this must be applied in the context of a church community that is honest enough, messy enough, and bold enough to walk it all out together. These convictions must then be applied into practice – according first to the heart of Jesus, our mission & core values, and through practical ministry matters.

The Heart of Jesus:

Thus far, we've sought to establish a biblical worldview but – at the heart of it all – is a person, Jesus.

It's often been said that Jesus did not address the question of same-sex relationships at all. This is not *entirely* true. What is true is that He didn't *specifically* address it – most likely because He didn't need to. The Old Testament's prohibition went uncontested in His culture and was not a debated topic of His day. But He did speak to sexual distortion broadly (*see Mark 7:14-23*), He did join the rest of the Bible in affirming marriage as exclusively between a male and female (*see Mark 10:6-9*), and He did stress higher standards of sexual purity and holiness, not lower ones (*see Matthew 5*).

And yet, in unrelenting grace & uncompromising truth... He said to everyone "Come."

Our Mission & Core Values:

Given Jesus' invitation, we are for anyone and everyone who wants to come. Period.

Our mission is "building a church *for* the unchurched." This means that we are FOR EVERYONE. The once-churched, the dis-churched, the never-churched, and the overly-churched. That would include, but not be limited to, the gossiper, the prideful, swindler, divorced, adulterer, self-righteous, and the smug.

And - since God has called us to this mission - it just makes logical sense that we are for LGBTQ+ people too. That might make some feel really uncomfortable. But when God called us to start a church in a basement in 1986 He didn't put limits on whom the unchurched would be and whom we are called to love. And those within the LGBTQ+ community are largely unchurched. They have felt painfully ostracized and treated as outcasts by the Church at large. Among the younger generations surveyed, for example, 91% described Christians as "anti-homosexual."²¹ This posture of judgment, condemnation, and ridicule does not reflect the life and heart of Jesus and must be confessed and repented of.

The good news in all of this is that we have an opportunity. We get to bring the element of surprise by demonstrating the heart and hope of Jesus to people who are, perhaps, least expecting it.

And what do we hope will be their surprise? Honesty, hospitality, excellence, and fun. These are our core values and they guide the character and essence of our community life:

- *be honest* – with yourself, with others, and with God.
- *practice hospitality* – wherever you are.
- *develop excellence* – give your very best to God.
- *have fun* – take Jesus seriously, including His joy.²²

We hope that everyone who crosses our path will experience these qualities in full force.

²¹ From the book *UnChristian - What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters* by David Kinnaman (pg. 93)

²² [View a fuller description of our Core Values HERE.](#)

Practical ministry matters:

1. PARTICIPATION

Given what we've established about our equality of brokenness and common need for restoration, it just makes sense that a LGBTQ+ person would not only be able to belong, but to participate with us in community life.

Again, this requires that we eliminate our unspoken, self-ranking hierarchy of sin. When thinking about the many questions this begs, it's helpful to first think about what one might (mistakenly) consider "lesser sins" and how the church should respond. Would we, for example...

- Allow a prideful person to attend our church? Of course.
- Would we welcome a cohabiting couple to a couple's class? Yes.
- Would we put someone committing adultery into a place of leadership? No.
- Would we plug in one who gossips into a greeter role? All the time.
- Would we serve communion to someone who lies? Why not.
- Would we accept a greedy person's financial donation? Yes.
- Would we allow an atheist to preach on Sunday? No.

Thus, we welcome a LGBTQ+ person to participate in our many community life opportunities (e.g. Men's Ministry, Women's Ministry, Student Ministry, etc.).

Look, this isn't easy. And it will be messy. And we'll have to figure it out as we go but again, welcome to the beautiful and messy tension of being the church of Jesus. And the church we must be! As Wesley Hill writes – a gay man who has chosen a celibate life out of a deeper devotion to Christ – *"The remedy for loneliness – if there is such a thing this side of God's future – is to learn, over and over again, to do this: to feel God's keeping presence embodied in the human members of the community of faith, the church."*²³

2. SACRAMENTS

Sacraments are cherished signs or rituals that the church has practiced for centuries. In one way or another, they offer us the ability to remember and proclaim Christ's resurrection and the impact of God's grace upon our daily lives. We have processed the below sacraments through our biblical worldview as expressed in this letter.

While we hope these guidelines are helpful upfront, we realize that these can be deeply personal and delicate matters for many and that they are best served thru meaningful conversation and relationship.

- **Marriage**

We affirm the biblical call of marriage to be exclusively between a man and a woman. Therefore, we would not officiate, host, nor condone a same-sex wedding ceremony (*see Genesis 2:20-25, Mark 10:6-9*). We do believe that attending a wedding should be left to each person's personal discernment.

- **Communion**

The Bible says that we are to examine ourselves before taking communion (*see 1 Corinthians 11:27*). However, it does not say that we are to examine others. Additionally, the communion table is about remembering the grace of God for all who believe. Therefore, we open the communion table to anyone who can proclaim their belief in Jesus as their Lord (*see 1 Corinthians 11:26*).

²³ From the book *Washed and Waiting - Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* by Wesley Hill (pg. 113)

- **Baptism**

We believe that baptism is the starting line of a believer's journey and not the finish line. In the New Testament, this appeared to always be the case where many broken people were welcomed into the waters before their outward lives warranted it (e.g. see Acts 2:38-41, 8:26-40, 10:44-48, 16:11-15, 16:16-34, etc.). That's grace. Thus, baptism is less about one's outward behavior and much more about a person's declaration to repent and make Jesus their Lord; that something *positionally* in their standing with God has changed and that their spiritual maturity is a continual *process from that point*. More specifically, the repentance we are celebrating is their turning to Jesus and it's highly probable that one may enter the water unaware of the many behavioral sins in their life. In any event, that's how it worked for me and seemed to be the case for the many lives who found water in the Scriptures. In short, God meets each of us at our own starting line and this is always something to celebrate.

- **Child Dedication & Baptism**

We will pray for any and every child, and at any time! Under no circumstance, would we ever miss the chance to join Jesus in this sacred practice. Jesus said, *"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."* He then took the children into his arms, placed his hands upon them and blessed them (see Mark 10:13-16).

From this powerful moment, I believe that we can infer two things:

1. Jesus received *every* kid
2. Jesus did so *without* commentary on the parents – no matter their imperfections.

Now, Jesus wasn't conducting a formal dedication service for us to emulate *per say*. It appeared much too organic and spontaneous for that. But it was an incredibly powerful moment that demonstrated Jesus' love for and accessibility to children. Based on this, we would never withhold the blessing of any child in keeping with the heart of Jesus.

However, we do believe that – all things remaining equal – it is in the best interest of any child to have both a mom and a dad who are in a married covenant. We also strongly believe that parents are the primary faith-shapers of their home. So we seek to come alongside all parent(s) – wherever they may be in life, relationship, or in the spiritual journey – to vision cast, partner, equip, and help process this question: *"How will baptizing or dedicating your child be an expression of your heart for your child's future and your desire to help them discover their best life in Jesus?"*

3. SERVING

Serving is such a powerful tool to our spiritual growth and no one should be denied that opportunity. We don't have this all figured out, of course, and have to trust God as we go forward. But we do know two things: (a) it is vital that we seek to be fair and consistent and (b) one's serving role in the church should always be commensurate with their spiritual maturity. Thus, we have arranged all of the serving opportunities in our church around three faith stages:

1. *Exploring* – serving roles that anyone can do.
2. *Growing* – serving roles that require some level of spiritual maturity.
3. *Leading* – leading roles that require spiritual maturity in order to lead others.²⁴

²⁴ See also <http://www.heartlandchurch.org/new/i-want-to-grow/>

4. LEADERSHIP

We believe that everyone should serve within the church as a practical step in their spiritual growth. We do, however, distinguish between *servicing* in our community and *leadership* of our community. For our leaders, then, we ask for more because – at its core – leadership is about influence. Therefore, we give special consideration to those we place in such pivotal roles (see *James 3:1-2; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 5:22; Galatians 5:16-25*).

And what do we expect of ourselves as leaders?

Quite simply, we ask our leaders to consistently grow towards Jesus and become increasingly like Him. A leader can jeopardize their role when they no longer move in that direction. This can occur if they, for example, deny their sin and/or are unwilling to address it (see *1 John 1:5-2:6*). With regards to this specific issue – and consistent with any other habitual and reoccurring practice of sins (i.e. greed, adultery, deceit, gossip, etc.) – we would not place in leadership someone who is in a same-gender sexual relationship. We would, however, call to leadership someone who struggles with same-sex attraction but who has chosen to sexually abstain as a reflection of their deeper devotion to Christ as Lord.

Leading does require more but it does not require perfection. Brokenness does not disqualify anyone from serving or leading. If it did, we *all* need not apply. Including, say, King David...

5. EMPLOYMENT

As an extension of our leadership development path, we also would not employ nor retain the employment of someone who is in a practicing same-sex relationship. We would, however, employ someone who struggles with same-sex attraction but who has chosen to sexually abstain as a reflection of their deeper devotion to Christ as Lord.

Look. This isn't fun stuff.

We *never* want to judge what is only God's to judge, but Jesus does call us to discern a tree's health by its fruit (see *Matthew 7:16-20*).

Our Commitment & Hope

If you are a LGBTQ+ person, our commitment to you is that we will never try to force change upon you. Coercion or manipulation or behavioral management is never the church's job, no matter the brokenness. Transformation does not work that way. It happens through the restorative work of Jesus and the power of His Spirit. Our job, then, is to simply cheer and challenge ourselves towards Him.

My hope for you is the same hope that I have for myself – *that you'll pursue Jesus with us and that we'll let Him make each of us whole.*

The question, however, that every single one of us must ask is this: *'Am I willing to cooperate with Him to that end?'*

In Closing...

I want to give one more reason why I'm addressing this topic: **We can do this.**

I believe that we have the courage and redemptive capacity to love well. In fact, let me share three things that I love about you, Church.

- *First, you're laid back.* Informal. Fun. You don't take yourself too seriously. You're one big party in search of a food truck.
- *Second, you are Jesus-centered.* If we're honest, you have a subtle disdain for religious stuff but you have a passion for knowing & following Jesus.
- *Third, you are a grace place.* You're anchored in truth, of course, but you love to lavish grace upon others. You love the furthest out person. You love to come alongside the least likely. This, I think, is your dominant trait.
- *Lastly, you are generous & have a bias for action.* You've never been ones to sit around. You don't form church counsels or committees. Ever since the day this church started in a basement, you have always been willing to inconvenience yourself, take the risk, bridge the gap, and die to self. And you do so always on behalf of the other, the unchurched, and never for yourself.

All that to say, we're a pretty healthy and highly imperfect community. And it's what I love about you, Heartland. And it's why I believe that God has given us the redemptive capacity to love well in all things. Even this.

In grace & truth,

Dan

Resources:

[Click here to view our Learning Plan](#) (a 7-week path of study & prayer our staff and elders engaged in during the fall/winter of 2014)