



REDEEMER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH *of Memphis*

Introduction to Redeemer

redeemermemphis.org/intro

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Session 1 - Our Story

“I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?” - Samwise Gamgee, *The Lord of the Rings*

1. What is the Larger Story?

Act 1 - Creation

Genesis 1:1 - In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Genesis 1:27 - So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:28 - And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Human beings were designed to be loved and to love in our 4 primary relationships - our relationship with God, ourselves, each other, and the world around us.

Act 2 - The Fall

Our relationship with God – enmity, wrath, judgment.

Our relationship with our self - guilt, shame, corruption, disordered desires.

Our relationship with others - conflict, murder, oppression, hostility, blame, war, etc.

Our relationship with the world/culture - natural disasters, viruses, diseases, work becomes hard and frustrating.

Act 3 - Redemption

1 Timothy 3:15 - Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

1 Peter 3:18 - For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

Act 4 - Restoration

Revelation 21:5 - And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.

2. Why Does it Matter?

1) How we understand our self as a church

Not as a social club, a TED Talk, a concert venue, or a social cause.

The church is an outpost of heaven breaking into this world.

This changes how we relate to church: we no longer consume church.

2) How we understand our purpose as a church

“Mission is not ours; mission is God’s....It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission - God’s mission.” - Christopher Wright, The Mission of God, 62.

In Christ, He forms a new you, gathers you into a new people (the church), and sends you to bring about a new world.

“The whole Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.” - Wright, The Mission of God, 51.

This changes how we relate to Midtown: we no longer consume Midtown.

Summary

God is on a mission to make all things new. And He is forming a new people, the Church, within His world to join Him in this great renovation project.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does the larger story of the Bible help you to understand yourself?
2. How does the larger story of the Bible help you to understand Redeemer and our purpose?
3. What would it look like for you to participate in God’s mission, specifically in Midtown?

Session 2 - Our Approach

“To do the most good requires saying ‘no’ to the pressures to stray and the discipline to stop doing what does not fit.” - Jim Collins

We are a worshipping community sharing in Christ’s mission to make all things new.

Love of God

- a) Inside church - public worship, fellowship
- b) Outside of church - private worship, growth in grace

Love of Neighbor

- a) Inside church - community, care, nurture
- b) Outside of church - evangelism, justice, service, work

1. Rest (Worshipping Community)

Religion: I obey, then I am accepted

Irreligion: I obey, then I am accepted

The Gospel: I am accepted, then I obey

Eph 2:8-9 - For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Isa 30:15 - For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, “In repentance and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”

2. Remind (Relational Community)

“...the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

This is why the church is described as the **body** of the Christ.

God Himself is a Trinity - a community of persons. It doesn't make any sense to think that you can connect with a Trinity in solitude. By yourself. You can't. There is no such thing as a *merely* personal relationship with God. You need community.

Community Groups: a space to be known and to know others

3. Reflect (Missional Community)

1 John 4:19 - We love because He first loved us.

God's love isn't supposed to just flow to you but through you.

- 1) Invest – Where can I pour out my gifts and energy in Midtown?
- 2) Incarnate – How can I embed my life more into Midtown?
- 3) Invite – Who can I bring with me to Redeemer?

“The indifference on the part of outsiders to Christianity is simply a reflection of the indifference of Christians towards people and their needs.” - Roger Greenway

Summary

Redeemer is a community of people trying to learn how to love God and love our neighbor. The way that we do that is to rest, remind, and reflect the love of God in Jesus.

Reflection Questions:

1. What does it look like for you to rest in God's love?
2. What are some tangible ways that you might help remind others of God's love?
3. How could you help Redeemer reflect the love of God in Midtown?

Session 3 - Our Culture

“The true measures of a church are not ‘how many’ but ‘how loving,’ not ‘how relevant’ but ‘how real.’” - Robert Lewis

1. Gospel Centrality: Jesus Plus Nothing

Centering our message, motives, and mission on the gospel of grace

The gospel is the good news that God has come to reconcile sinners and all of creation to Himself.

Ex. Rocket blasting to space.

Political tangents - abortion, gay rights, gun control

Theological tangents - end times, baptism, speaking in tongues, creation/evolution

Ethical tangents - schooling, parenting styles

2. Missional Identity: Not For Ourselves

Designing our programs, events, and communication for our friends and neighbors who are unchurched and de-churched

“The church is the only institution in the world that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.” – William Temple

So this means that every level of our church - our programs, events, the way that we communicate - is designed for our friends and neighbors who are unchurched and de-churched. This means that we give time and money in service to our neighbors before we serve ourselves. This means that we expect people that are unchurched and de-churched to be present at everything we do as a church.

3. Midtown Priority: In Midtown for Midtown

Focusing our energy and resources on Midtown

- 1) Midtown is the cultural and entertainment hub of Memphis.
- 2) More unchurched and de-churched people tend to live in the urban core of cities and in this case, Midtown.
- 3) Midtown is both beautiful and broken. It just feels much more accentuated here in Midtown

Our hope is that the people of Redeemer would love and care for every component of Midtown - it's people and institutions. That means working here, playing here, living here. Celebrating what is beautiful and confronting/challenging what is broken.

4. Intentional Community: Better Together

Gathering together to learn from and grow with one another

We encourage (perhaps *expect!*) our members to be involved in a Community Group.

You aren't joining a worship service but a community.

5. Tangible Hospitality: You Belong, Even if you Don't Believe

Welcoming and embracing all in the name of Jesus

Making room for someone. Meeting a stranger and embracing that stranger as neighbor.

Tangible Hospitality means we want to be super intentional about greeting new people.

Tangible Hospitality also means that we are patient with people.

Tangible Hospitality also means inviting new people in our homes, lunch, coffee, etc.

6. Charitable Catholicity: The Church is Bigger than Us

Working to build and protect friendships across the entire church

Apostle's Creed – "I believe in the catholic church."

We do not bash other churches.

We seek to be connected to other churches.

Summary

We want to create a church culture that is shaped by the gospel, mission, Midtown, togetherness, hospitality, and catholicity.

Reflection Questions:

1. Are any of these values surprising to you? Why is that?
2. Which of these 6 values is the most meaningful to you? Why is that?
3. Which of these 6 values do you want to see Redeemer grow in?

Session 4 - Our Beliefs

Catholic, Historically Protestant & Reformed

Catholic

Redeemer Presbyterian Church embraces the *catholic* (or orthodox) Christian faith; that is, we confess with all Christians the ecumenical creeds of the early church (*the Apostles', Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds*), summarized as follows:

- **The Trinity.** There is one God, who eternally exists in a communion of three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- **The Incarnation.** The Second Person of the Holy Trinity—God the Son—became man in the person of Jesus Christ and is both fully God and fully human; one person with two natures (one divine, one human).
- **The Atonement.** Jesus Christ died on the cross and was raised from the dead for the salvation of his people.
- **The Church.** God is doing His work of salvation in and through a community of people assembled from every ethnicity, language, tradition, and nation.

Historically Protestant

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is also a *historically Protestant* church. As such, we believe that God has brought a great salvation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We must respond in faith and be transformed through it.

- **The Centrality of Christ And The Gospel.** Jesus said that everything written in the Old Testament was fulfilled in him (Luke 24:44) and those clinging to the historic protestant faith have centered themselves on the person and work of Jesus the Christ. They believe that Jesus is the only source of salvation.
- **The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture.** We believe the Holy Scriptures are trustworthy, authoritative, and compelling for belief and life. We believe this because the Scriptures are *inspired* (2 Timothy 3:16), meaning God oversaw the writing the Bible in such a way that He speaks to us in and through its very words. We believe, consequently, that the Scriptures are *inerrant*—without error in all that it asserts and, when properly interpreted.
- **Salvation by Faith Alone.** We believe salvation is only by God's grace, and is received solely by faith in Christ. Our good works evidence, but do not produce salvation (*faith = salvation + works NOT faith + works = salvation*).
- **The Mission of the Church.** God's mission is to make all things *NEW* through Jesus Christ. Christians are people who share the same blessings and plight as everyone else in this beautiful, yet broken world. But members in Christ's church *have been* redeemed and *are being* restored and *are called to share* in Christ's healing mission on behalf of the world and all members of the human family.

Reformed

We are also committed to the *reformed* faith, expressing those doctrinal views associated within the family of historic Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

- **Covenant Theology:** Reformed theology sees the Old and New Testaments as one unified whole with one beautiful message of redemption. The guiding framework is that of covenants. That is, in Scripture, we see God’s promise to make a people for himself unfold throughout Scripture; what was promised and hinted at in the Old Testament becomes clearer in the New Testament.
- **Sovereignty of God:** The Reformed view understands that God is uniquely sovereign in his Creation whereby he preserves and governs “all his creatures and all their actions.” This is true in all aspects of life, including salvation. At the same time, this does not diminish humans’ responsibility for their actions (e.g., Gen. 50:19-20, Acts 2:23).
- **God’s Law:** Reformed churches have taught that the Law of God in the Scriptures was given to Israel, some for temporal uses (ceremonial laws which Jesus has fulfilled as well as civil laws which only applied to the unique government of ancient Israel) and others which are permanent (moral law which is continually reaffirmed throughout Scripture). This moral law has 3 uses in the life of the believer:
 - Fence: The law restrains the evil in our world.
 - Mirror: The law demonstrates our own inadequacies to save ourselves and thus points us to Christ.
 - Guide: The law reveals to God’s children what is pleasing to him, and thus what full life looks like.
- **Kingdom of God:** Reformed theology also affirms that the Gospel is good news not only for individuals, but also for all of creation. In other words, Jesus is not only our Lord, but also Lord over all! The expansiveness of Jesus’ Lordship has major implications for the mission of the church, our vocation and engagement with God’s world, and the Spirit’s transformative presence.
- **The Church:** The Church is the collection of God’s covenant people (those who have received God’s promises) in both the Old and New Testaments. The church ministers to people through the preaching of God’s Word, church discipline, and administering the sacraments (in the New Covenant: baptism and the Lord’s Supper).
- **Sacraments:** Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as ordinances instituted by Christ where he uses sensible signs to impart himself and his gracious gifts.
 - Baptism is the sign and seal of our entrance into God’s covenant community. Just as circumcision was used in the Old Covenant, baptism is for professed believers and their children (cf., Gen. 17:1-14, Acts 2:39, Col. 2:11-12)
 - Lord’s Supper is a sacrament where we are spiritually united with Christ and thus receive his benefits, nourishment, and growth. This is given to members of Christ’s Church who are able to follow Paul’s command in 1 Cor. 11:28 to examine themselves of their ability to discern the Lord’s body. This means that it is given to members who have publicly professed their faith in Christ.

Our official doctrinal statement is found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (<http://www.pcaac.org/resources/wcf/>), a beautiful exposition of Biblical beliefs and practice.

Summary

We want to graciously and honestly discover what God has revealed about himself and his ways in the world together.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you been exposed to a church tradition in the past? If so, how is it similar or dissimilar?
2. Are any of our beliefs surprising to you? Why is that?
3. Which one of these beliefs would you like to ask or read more about?

Session 5 - Our Tradition (Presbyterian)

- 1. The Congregation:** The congregation of every local church is called to carry out the work of Christ's church – primarily in fulfilling Christ's command to love one another. This includes regularly gathering together, sharing joys and burdens with one another, praying for one another, encouraging one another, serving one another, teach and admonish one another. They are also to discern the Lord's calling for who will lead them in the ordained offices of Elder and Deacon. Women, men, and children alike are to lead one another in these ministries.
- 2. The Elders:** Presbyterian churches are governed by groups of men (see Appendix 1) commonly called *elders*. (The Greek word for elder is *presbyteros*.) Ordinarily, "elder" refers to laymen who are called to share in the governing of the church; these men are often called "ruling elders." Ordained ministers are also considered elders, and in the PCA are often called "teaching elders." Basically, all ministers are elders, but not all elders are ministers. (We at Redeemer use the term "pastor" or "minister" to refer to what the PCA calls "teaching elders.") The calling of the ministers and elders is essentially *pastoral*; they are to shepherd and lead the flock.
 - The minister and elders are to receive, guide, direct, and guard (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 5:1-3); to teach and exhort (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9); and to correct (Titus 1:9; Acts 20:30-31).
 - Ministers especially carry out this pastoral duty by devoting themselves to the public preaching and teaching of the Word of God. However, the other elders also teach the people, primarily in classes, small groups, and in personal conversation.
 - The pastoral duty of the ministers and elders, of course, includes dealing with sheep who go astray. As individuals and as a group, ministers and elders have a responsibility to instruct and warn believers who are falling into false doctrine or unbiblical patterns of behavior.
 - As a group, the members of church courts may exercise formal discipline over church members under their oversight. If necessary, they may impose the following formal censures: admonition (a formal warning to repent), suspension from the sacraments, suspension or removal from office (for ministers, elders, and deacons), and excommunication (the solemn removal of a person from membership in Christ's Church). In all cases, strict controls are to be followed, and the goal is always for the wayward sheep to be welcomed back into the fold with celebration!
 - Ministers and elders are also to equip believers for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12) and oversee the various ministries of the church (1 Timothy 3:5; 5:7).
 - This does not mean that the ministers and elders "run" the church, in the sense that they micro-manage its day-to-day operations and ministries. To do this would not only distract them from their unique responsibilities, it would be to rob the men and women of the church of their opportunity to use their God-given abilities in ministry.
 - Yet the ministers and elders do have a responsibility to ensure that the ministries are faithful to the theological vision of the church.
- 3. Deacons:** In addition to elders, PCA churches typically have one other "office," that of *deacon*. The primary ministry of the diaconate is to assist the ministers and elders in various

ways, including the oversight of ministries to the poor and needy. Redeemer does not currently have deacons.

4. **Church Courts:** When Presbyterians use the word “church,” we often mean more than just the local congregation. The church exists in concentric circles of accountability, and the governing councils are historically known in Presbyterianism as the “courts” of the church.
- A local church body is governed by its minister(s) and elders; this council is called the *Session*.
 - The regional church is also governed by its ministers and elders; this council is known as the *Presbytery*.
 - The highest church council for the entire PCA also consists of ministers and elders; this is called the *General Assembly*.

General Assembly																							
Regional Presbytery			Regional Presbytery			Regional Presbytery																	
Local Church Session	Local Church Session	Local Church Session	Local Church Session	Local Church Session	Local Church Session	Local Church Session	Local Church Session	Local Church Session															
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Summary

We want our church to be marked by accountability while not binding the consciences over matters of wisdom.

Reflection Questions:

1. What frustrates you in form of church government? Why is that?
2. What surprises you about our form of government? Why is that?

Session 6 - Our Members

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. – Acts 2:42

Meaning of Membership

People often ask, “Why do you emphasize membership? Where is that in the Bible?” The answer is simple: while the phrase “church membership” is not used explicitly in the Bible, the concept is presupposed on every page (cf. 1 Peter 5:1-5: How do you practice this without belonging to a church?). The portrait we see in the churches of the New Testament are places who have:

1. A shared commitment to Jesus and his Kingdom
2. A shared commitment to one another

In the end, true Christian community can only come from a people who have committed themselves to these two things. Indeed, *there is no such thing as community without commitment*. That is why to be a member of a church, you are asked to take public vows.

Membership Commitments

Here are the 5 vows which each new member takes when joining the church:

The first three questions are asking “are you committed to Jesus and his Kingdom”?

1. ***Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure and without hope except through his sovereign mercy?***

It is important to come to grips with the bad news of our depravity because, without understanding this truth, the good news of the gospel is robbed of its glory.

2. ***Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered in the gospel?***

Of course, this membership vow presupposes orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement.

A key word here is *alone*. It is vital to realize that justification comes through faith *plus nothing*. In no way do we contribute to our salvation.

Also key is the word *resting*, conveying the idea that we have repented not only of our sins, but of our righteousness—of our attempts to earn God’s favor through good works. By affirming this vow you are publicly confessing that you are trusting only in Jesus Christ—in his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection—for your acceptance by God the Father.

3. ***Do you resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?***

This question is about growth. Are you committed to seeing your life transformed more and more into the image of Christ – loving what He loves and hating what he hates. Please note, this

is not about whether you are *struggling* to obey Christ. The church is a community of sinners after all. The promise is that you will take active steps to fight known sin in your life and actively seek God's Kingdom. The phrase "in humble reliance on the Holy Spirit" implies that you cannot do this on your own, but as the Spirit works through the means of grace – especially the community of believers who are mutually dependent on one another.

The reality is that you were never meant to live the Christian life alone. While it is nearly impossible for 21st Century Americans to understand this, the good life in God's Kingdom is not individuality but community. In this community, no one is ever without family, without support, without encouragement, without their needs being cared for. We need a community to raise our kids, live as singles, promote the common good, and to be reminded that the Gospel is true.

The last two questions are asking, "Are you committed to 'loving one another?'"

4. *Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?*

This includes assent to the church's general vision and philosophy of ministry, including our commitment to the centrality of worship, to Community Groups, to being a church for the unchurched, and to serving the city of Memphis.

This promise also includes the understanding that Redeemer is a Presbyterian church and that, while you may not hold Presbyterian views yourself, you are knowingly and willingly joining a church which holds these distinct views.

This also includes the responsibility of supporting the church with your time and money, being a good steward of that with which God has entrusted to you, and being involved in the ministry of Redeemer.

5. *Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the church, promising to promote its purity and peace?*

The idea of *accountability* to a church is not necessarily a popular idea. This is the vow that gets challenged more than all the others combined. Yet hundreds of thousands of Christians will testify to the benefits of being a part of a community where people love you enough to be honest with you. The sad reality of being a community of sinners is that we will fail each other, harm one another, and discourage one another. The question is not if those situations will arise, but how we are committed to responding to one another when they do.

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. – Matthew 18:15-17

In Presbyterian churches, each local church and each minister is held accountable to the church as a whole—while preserving local autonomy on things such as style and philosophy of ministry. In the same way, while expression of individual gifts is a priority, each individual church member has a relationship of accountability to the church.

General oversight. As Christians, we are to encourage one another constantly to follow Christ. Moreover, pastors and elders have the authority to inquire into the general lifestyle of believers, to disciple, to encourage, and to admonish. This general oversight is a privilege for which we should all be thankful. (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13)

Judicial discipline. While ministers and elders cannot bind the conscience of believers beyond the teachings of Scripture, they do have genuine authority to lead the people according to biblical standards. For example, they cannot say, “You must be in a community group,” but they can say, “You must break off this adulterous affair.” In those cases where pastoral counsel regarding sin (public, blatant, and habitual) does not result in repentance, the stages of formal church discipline begin. This starts with formal admonition, and then can escalate to suspension from the sacraments and even to removal from membership in the church (excommunication). Discipline is never merely for some particular sin, but is always for *refusal to repent* over a sin. The goal of church discipline is always the complete restoration of the offender. (1 Corinthians 5).

You are also committing yourself to a balanced pursuit of purity and peace, of truth and love. This means that you will deal with conflict in biblical ways—in honest, loving, confrontation—and that problems will be brought to the pastors and elders; you are promising to avoid gossip, slander, and all hurtful means of communication.

Expectations of Members

What does it mean to be an active member of Redeemer Presbyterian Church? How should you flesh out your promise to “support the Church”? What does God intend for his people to do as a part of his church? We hope to see all of our members involved in at least the following areas:

1. **Growing in Faith:** Regular use of the “means of grace”—Bible reading, fellowship, corporate worship (including sacraments), and prayer— methodically for your own spiritual growth.
2. **Weekly worship with the people of God:** “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” — Hebrews 10:23-25
3. **Engage in Churchwide Programming and Initiatives:** When we as a church endeavor to live out our mission through a particular ministry initiative or program, we are entirely reliant on one another to see it happen. Therefore, as members we expect one another to engage *as much as possible* in Community Groups, classes, prayer initiatives, times of fellowship, and outreach opportunities.
4. **Ministry Team:** While there are numerous ways by which we can engage in the ministry of the church, each member at Redeemer is asked to adopt at least one Ministry Team to dedicate their time and gifts. When you join, we will work directly with you to identify a place where you can serve with the particular gifts and experiences God has given you. Some of our current teams include

- Assimilation Team
- City/World Serve Team
- Children's Team
- Facilities Team
- Member Care Team
- Music Team
- Neighboring Team
- Safety Team
- Youth Team

5. **Commit to *our* Midtown Neighbors:** We want our neighborhood and our neighbors to be confronted with the goodness of God's Kingdom as we labor endlessly on the neighborhood's behalf. Obviously, the absolute best way to invest is to live or work in Midtown. However, not all members are able live or work in our primary target area. No matter where you live, we can all join in the church's target area through a variety of opportunities:

- Pray for the un-churched/de-churched in our community: This is something everyone can do! There is no greater tool available to us.
- Volunteer at non-profits located in or working in Midtown/Downtown. There are no shortage of these in Midtown.
- Prioritize being in community with people who fit our target audience. We all make decisions on where we will spend our time and resources. When you make these kinds of options, consider if a Midtown option may work for you. These decisions could be things like:
 - Schools: Public or Private
 - Gyms
 - Sport Leagues: Youth and Adult
 - Book Clubs, Hobby Groups, etc
 - Entertainment/Shopping Venues
- Support your fellow members who do live/minister in the target area. Find ways to meet and encourage their friendships with the unchurched.

6. **Financial Support:** Supporting the worship and work of the church to the best of your ability is one of the membership vows. While this certainly includes much more than money, it does not include less.

Here are three basic biblical teachings on the subject of giving:

a. ***Giving must be in significant proportions.*** The Bible gives three guidelines:

- **The guideline of the tithe:** In the Old Testament believers were required to give a tenth of their income to the support of the ministry and the needs of the poor. While the New Testament does not give believers this requirement today, surely we who are blessed more are not encouraged to give less. Thus the tithe (10%) is a kind of minimum guideline for giving.
- **The guideline of giving sacrificially:** The Apostle Paul says of the Macedonians, "they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of

their own free will” (2 Corinthians 8:3). That means they gave until it meant a sacrifice in their lifestyle.

- **The guideline of wisdom:** Christians are to give “according to [their] ability” (Acts 11:29). There are seasons to economic life, and we all have economic responsibilities to our families and to our debts. In many cases, good planning is necessary in order to gradually move our giving into Biblical proportions while still meeting personal and legal financial obligations.

- b. ***Giving is a joyful response to God’s grace.*** Paul asked for money by saying, “[I] say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:8-9). What a test! Paul says that the difference between moralists (those who think that God accepts them because of their goodness) and Christians (those who know they are sinners saved purely by grace) is that a Christian wants to give as generously as he or she has received. Put starkly, *we always give effortlessly to those things that give our lives meaning, to our “gods.”*

- c. ***Giving must be systematic and thoughtful.*** Paul directed the Corinthians to set aside a portion of their wealth each week until he would come and receive it, in this case for the relief of famine victims in Palestine (see 2 Corinthians 8 again). Giving “spontaneously” might meet point 2 above, but it’s rarely up to point 1. You need a plan, because your heart will naturally gravitate elsewhere.

Steps to Membership at Redeemer Memphis

1. **Complete Intro to Redeemer Class:** This class is the first step, although it in no way obligates you to membership.
2. **Complete and turn in Membership Profile including a brief account of your story:** This must be completed prior to your interview.
3. **The Membership Interview:** The interview is designed to give us a better chance to get to know you and make sure you’re ready to take your membership vows. Also, the interview is a great time to ask any questions you might have about the church.
4. **Reception of New Members during Worship:** At a Sunday worship service, you will be asked to come forward and affirm the membership vows with the congregation. If you are not already baptized, we would be honored to do this at that time.

Summary

We are a church community that is bound together by our commitments to Jesus and one another.

Reflection Questions:

1. What surprises you about our understanding of church membership? Why is that?
2. How would living in such a church community affect your day-to-day life?

Appendix 1 – Women in Ordained Offices

We live in a world with a long, continuing history where women have tragically been treated without their God-given dignity and worth. Patriarchal institutions have suppressed the gifts, abilities, opportunities, and education of women while at the same time attempting to control them through various manipulative means. As Christians, we encourage the promotion of the clear Scriptural teaching that women are made in the image of God with equal worth, dignity, agency, skills, and gifts. As Christians, we mourn that churches have not frequently been institutions where these truths were on display. In fact, churches have often been some of the worst promoters of sexism, bigotry, and hate. Sadly, the church has not always let Scripture lead our thinking, but rather the church at times has been led by the impulses of traditional cultures.

As a church, we are committed to seeing women thrive in positions of teaching and leadership just as we do our non-ordained men. At the same time, we are persuaded that the Scriptures are clear that the ordained officers in the church are to be drawn from among the male members (1 Timothy 2:12-13). We believe that abandoning this biblical and historical view is an error.

Our understanding is that the Scriptures strongly affirm the fundamental *equality* of men and women—both men and women are fully the very image and likeness of God. While strongly affirming this personal equality, the Scriptures, however, do not teach that men and women are simply *interchangeable*. Men and women, while clearly equal, are also different and have different roles within the church. Therefore, the biblical pattern of eldership is neither traditional nor progressive. The progressive approach rejects the idea that authority can ever co-exist with equality (which goes against the doctrine of the Trinity, see Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Corinthians 11:3). The traditional approach believes that authority assumes inequality (which goes against the doctrine of creation, see Genesis 1:26-27).

While we affirm Scriptures' teachings, we also want to be sure that we do not teach what Scripture does not. In Scripture, we see the authoritative teaching (preaching) and governing to be reserved for those men in the office of elder. All other kinds of praying, speaking, teaching, and leading are seen in Scriptures to be fulfilled by unordained women and men (Acts:18:24-26, 1 Corinthians 11:5, Acts 2:17-18, 21:9, etc.). Because of these biblical examples, our church strongly promotes the leadership of women in all areas except the ordained ruling elder office. We believe that women can do anything non-ordained men can do at Redeemer.

We realize that our position on these issues is counter cultural. As with all debatable doctrine, we recognize that it is possible for Christians committed to the authority of Scripture to disagree on our understanding of elders. We are committed to working alongside of others that might hold a view that differs from Redeemer. As such, the membership vows of Redeemer do not require a member to fully agree on these issues as Christ alone is Lord of the conscience.

Appendix 2 – Infant Baptism¹

Infant Baptism at Redeemer Presbyterian Church

It is the regular practice at Redeemer Presbyterian Church to baptize two groups of people. The first group consists of men, women, and children who demonstrate both a genuine faith in Jesus Christ and a desire to join the church family (i.e., “believer’s baptism”). The second group consists of the infants and children of Redeemer members.

“Why do you baptize infants and children who have not yet made a public profession of faith in Christ?”

The simple answer to this question is that (1) while we firmly believe this is *not* an issue over which Christians should divide, yet (2) we are convinced that both the Bible and early church history support the practice of household baptism, which includes infants and young children. Following are some of the factors that have led us to this conclusion.

Biblical Rationale

It is the belief of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and of Redeemer Presbyterian Church that God’s covenant of grace (His promise to be our God and have us as His people), in a mysterious way that we cannot quite grasp, extends to the children of believers. Such children, we believe, therefore have a right to the covenant sign, which in the New Testament is baptism (in the Old Testament the sign was circumcision). Following is a detailed reasoning of why we, at the request of those who share our beliefs on this matter, will baptize infants, as well as other children in a believing household who have not yet made a profession of faith.

In the New Testament, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

- Colossians 2:11-12 teaches that baptism is the full expression of circumcision. The covenant of circumcision required that the infant male be circumcised as a newborn infant (Genesis 17:12), and this covenant was to be an *everlasting* covenant (Genesis 17:13). Physical circumcision is clearly no longer in effect (Galatians 6:11-18), but the covenant it represents *is* still in effect (Romans 2:29). The new outward sign of this “everlasting” covenant with believers and their children is baptism (Colossians 2:11- 12). Therefore, we believe it follows, then, that baptism is to be administered to the children of believing parents.
- Acts 2:38-39 describes baptism with virtually the same language and terms with which Genesis 17:9-14 describes circumcision. The promise connected with baptism in Acts 2:38-39 explicitly includes the children of believers, as did the promise connected with

¹ The following is from Redeemer Presbyterian Church at https://download.redeemer.com/pdf/Infant_Baptism_at_RPC.pdf

circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14. No mention of a required age or profession of faith is made with respect to such children.

- As circumcision was a requirement for the Old Testament household (Genesis 17:10, 12-13), so, we believe, was baptism for the New Testament household (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Never once are children said to be excluded from a household baptism, except in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, who obviously had no children.
- There is no biblical command given for believers to cease the application of the covenant sign with their children.

In the New Testament, believers' children were regarded as members of the covenant community.

- In Luke 18:15-17, Jesus said that God's Kingdom belongs to little children (from the Greek *brephe*, which literally means "baby" or "infant").
- In Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 Paul addresses children (from the Greek *tekna*, meaning "child") as believers in Christ. He speaks to them as he would any saint, regardless of age.
- In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul refers to the children (*tekna*) of believers as "holy" (meaning set apart for God). The word translated "holy" (*hagia*) is the exact same word used elsewhere by the apostles in reference to believers (translated "saints" – see Ephesians 1:1, for example). The New Testament assumption, then, is that children of believers should be *regarded* and *treated* as believers unless or until they prove themselves to be covenant breakers.
- In 2 Timothy 3:15, Timothy is said to have known the Scriptures from infancy (*brephe*).
- In Luke 1:15, John the Baptist is said to have been filled with the Spirit, "even from his mother's womb".
- The New Testament suggests nowhere that the sign of the covenant (previously circumcision, now baptism) is to be withheld from the children of believers until they make an informed profession of faith in Christ.

Our position on infant baptism does not reflect a belief that baptism itself saves a child.

In order to be saved, a child must possess his / her own personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. The initial seeds of faith may or may not be in chronological union with the time of baptism. When a child professes faith at some point after baptism, that is the time in which the baptism and all that it signifies takes full effect. Until that time, the child's baptism is regarded as the sign of the child's inclusion in the church community (and all its benefits, except the Lord's Supper) by virtue of his / her parents' faith and the promise of God to be "their God and the God of their children."

Historical Rationale

While the Scripture does not speak specifically to the baptism of infants in the early church, there is Biblical suggestion as well as historical evidence that household baptism was practiced at that time.

- Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John) speaks of infant baptism as a universal practice in the early church.
- Tertullian (end of 2nd century) acknowledged the universal practice of infant baptism.
- Origen (2nd and 3rd centuries) spoke of infant baptism as the common practice of the early church.
- These things being the case, were household (and consequently infant) baptism *not* the New Testament church practice, then the conclusion must be made that a full reversal of the early church's practice occurred immediately following the death of the last apostle. Because there is neither biblical nor extra-biblical evidence indicating so much as a debate about this issue in the first or second centuries, such a reversal is extremely unlikely. We conclude this in large part because there is a wealth of documentation about virtually every other theological debate and/or alleged "heresy" in the early church.

Our Attitude about Household Baptism

We encourage household baptism at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, but *do not require it* of those who cannot accept it. To us the biblical and supporting historical teaching seems clear, so we do encourage Redeemer parents to have their children baptized. However, parents who are not convinced of our position are *not* required to have their children baptized in order to be fully active and fully received church members, and will not in any way be pressured to do so. This is an issue about which we are happy to disagree without it being any hindrance at all to full Christian fellowship. We will under no circumstance make this "non-essential" issue an essential one.

Summary:

What does child baptism signify?

- *An outward sign of God's promises to the children of believers.* According to Scripture, baptism signifies the promise of God that He will give His Spirit to believers and their children. We take this to mean two things: First, that the child will be exposed to the work of the Spirit as he / she is raised in a Christian home and church where the Word of God is taught and lived. Second, that the child's parents can look expectantly to God for the salvation of their child, as the child is brought up in the ways of God.
- *An outward sign of the child's inclusion in the community of faith.* Like circumcision, in Scripture baptism represented the child's inclusion in the church community. By virtue of his / her baptism, the child becomes a "non-communicating member" of the church, and is entitled to all the benefits of a full church member, except (1) the right to receive the Lord's Supper, which first requires a credible profession of faith in Christ, and (2) the right to vote as a church member.
- *An outward sign of Jesus' heart for children.* Through child baptism the entire church community acknowledges Jesus' statement that the kingdom of God belongs to little ones. Jesus regularly included little children and babies in His fellowship.

What child baptism does not signify.

Baptism does *not* signify that the child is instantaneously saved upon baptism. There is no “magic” that takes place in this sacrament. The child’s salvation will be secured, as far as his / her parents and church are concerned, at the moment in which the child is converted to Christ through faith and repentance, not at the moment of baptism.

Parental promises at covenant baptism.

At Redeemer we encourage parents to study and take very seriously the promises they make at the baptism of their child. Along with the sacrament comes a solemn responsibility for parents, as well as the entire church family, to cooperate with the Spirit of God in the child’s spiritual upbringing. Following are the promises parents will take at baptism, along with explanations of each promise. Before bringing their child before the congregation for baptism, parents are asked to examine each promise to make certain they can assent to it with a clear conscience.

Promise 1: “Do you acknowledge your child’s need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?” In saying “yes” to this question, parents acknowledge that their child can only be saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The child is not a “Christian” by virtue of having Christian parents, or by virtue of being active at the church. The child must possess his / her own faith, something that will occur only when the Holy Spirit draws the child to God through faith in Christ.

Promise 2: Do you claim God’s covenant promises in your child’s behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for his / her salvation, as you do for your own? In saying “yes” to this question, parents acknowledge that God has made specific promises to them as Christian parents regarding their child, and they will claim these promises with reasonable hope that their child will be given the gift of faith, and in so doing will turn from sin and to Jesus.

Promise 3: Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before him / her a godly example, that you will pray with and for him / her, that you will teach him / her the doctrines of the Christian faith, and that you will strive, by all the means of God’s appointment, to bring him / her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? In saying “yes” to this question, parents commit themselves, in reliance upon the grace of God, to give their child to the Lord,² and raise their child according to God’s instruction. This means first that they will be careful to live a godly and upright life, according to the teaching of Scripture, as an ongoing example to their child.³ Second, this means that they will regularly pray for their child’s salvation and Christian growth, and that they will teach their child how to pray beginning at infancy and continuing throughout life. Third, this means that parents will teach their child the Scriptures and the truths

² **1 Samuel 1:27-28** 27 I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. 28 So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD.” And he worshiped the LORD there.

³ **1 Timothy 4:16** Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (This command is directed toward church leaders, but it applies to those who lead their children in the home also.)

of the Christian faith in the home, and will not view the church as the chief means for their child's spiritual training, but merely as a reinforcement to the training that they will do in the home. Parents also commit to creating a home environment that breathes the air of the Gospel. One of the most significant practices parents can model for their children is that of regular confession and repentance within the family.

Appendix 3 – Sexuality⁴

I am one of those Christians who sometimes gets labeled “too conservative” by liberal friends and “too liberal” by conservative friends. In the past, I was bothered by such labels. But over time I have come to believe that in most instances, this “hard to figure out place” is the best—and dare I say most faithful?—place that folks who want to follow the whole Jesus, the whole time, can be.

I hope that the following will make my case. I wrote these words in 2014. My views have not changed since that time. Now as much as then, I hope that Christians—as well as those who do not identify as Christian at all—will find my words compelling, persuasive, and, above all, congruent with the grace and truth of Jesus.

What if the church were full of people who were loving and safe, willing to walk alongside people who struggle? What if there were people in the church who kept confidences, who took the time to be Jesus to those who struggle with homosexuality? What if the church were what God intended it to be?

—An anonymous Christian who experiences same-sex attraction

One Sunday after a church service, a young woman introduced herself to me as a first-time visitor. After the usual “Nice to meet you; how did you hear about our church?” conversation, the woman wanted to know if she could ask me a direct question. “Of course,” I said. “Fire away.”

Before getting to her question, she offered a short speech. She said that she was single, sexually active, and frustrated with Christians who, according to her, were culturally regressive on the subject of sex. “We don’t live in Leave It to Beaver land anymore,” she continued. “I have gay and straight friends, including many who are not married, who like to have sex, and who feel fine about it. In today’s society, my friends and I are not alone. If churches want to stay relevant, if they want to reach the modern person, churches will need to catch up with the world on the subject of sex.”

She never asked her question.

Not too many weeks following this encounter, the New York Times came out with a piece about the hookup culture at Harvard University called “Students of Virginity.” In the article, a student who values sexual experimentation and having sexual encounters with multiple partners summarizes her viewpoint:

⁴ The following is from “Thoughts on LGBTQ+, Porn, Promiscuity, Community, and Christian Faithfulness” by Scott Sauls, June 2, 2018, <http://scottsauls.com/blog/2018/06/02/jotl-sex-chapter/>

*For me, being a strong woman means not being ashamed that I like to have sex. . . .
To say that I have to care about every person I have sex with is an unreasonable
expectation. It feels good! It feels good!*

These are just two examples that indicate how the tide has shifted in Western culture on the subject of sexuality. Whether it is Saturday Night Live teasing Jimmy Carter for confessing that he lusts sometimes; Woody Allen flippantly saying, “The heart wants what the heart wants” when pressed about his affair with his teenage stepdaughter; or sex-advice columnist Dan Savage advocating for open marriages because he thinks it’s unreasonable to expect people to be monogamous, all indications are that, indeed, we are not in Leave It to Beaver land.

Historic Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and many other major world religions have always believed that God gave us sex for two reasons. First, sex is for procreation. The only way for new life to be formed is through the uniting of sperm and egg. Second, sex is a way for men and women, specifically husbands and wives, to give and receive pleasure through the uniting of two bodies into one. The one-flesh union renews and solidifies marriage vows. It serves as a reminder that husbands and wives are no longer independent but belong to each other, body and soul. The union of two naked bodies affirms every other form of nakedness—personal, emotional, and spiritual.

Yet negative reactions to the biblical vision for sex abound in modern Western society. The blogosphere and general public conversation reflect a variety of opinions on the subject of marriage and sexuality. Even within communities of faith, intramural debates and divisions abound over this single, heated issue. Is the “sex is only for marriage between one man and one woman” view too limiting? Worse, is it insensitive, unloving, and oppressive because of how it prohibits consenting adults who love one another—single, gay, straight, monogamous, and polygamous—from enjoying the same freedoms that husbands and wives do?

The church visitor’s Leave It to Beaver comment made me wonder if she was familiar at all with the biblical vision for sex. Neither the modern hookup nor the Leave It to Beaver culture reflects a biblical view of sexuality. Instead, the Bible puts forward a vision for sexuality that is both chaste and free.

God Is in Favor of Chastity

Modern people often agree that as long as there are two (or more) willing parties, there really shouldn’t be an issue when it comes to a more open or “adventurous” approach to sexuality. So why does God make such a big deal about sex? Why would he spoil the pleasures of variety and experimentation by limiting sex to marriage between just one man and one woman? When there is mutual consent, nobody gets hurt. *It feels good! It feels good!* A warm fire also feels good, until we stop recognizing that it can hurt us. Like fire, sex can be incredibly life giving, comforting, and healing when handled with care. It is among the most delightful of all human activities. It is also among the most dangerous. Like fire, when sex is taken outside its natural and created boundaries, it becomes destructive, leaving burn marks and scars. That’s why God is in favor of chastity, or sexual abstinence, for those living outside the covenant of marriage.

Consider the current impact of pornography. According to Frank Rich of the New York Times, in 2001 Americans spent between \$10 billion and \$14 billion each year on pornography. Current statistics indicate that US spending on pornography is still hovering around \$14 billion. Additionally, a staggering \$97 billion per year is spent on pornography worldwide, which means

that the annual revenue for porn exceeds the revenues of the world's top technology companies combined: Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix, and Earthlink. Frank Rich also contends that pornography as an industry has outgrown all major league sports and possibly even the Hollywood film industry. Porn is “no longer a sideshow to the mainstream,” he says. “It is the mainstream.” The psychological and physiological impact has been devastating. In a featured article in *New York Magazine*, Naomi Wolf observes:

Pornography works in the most basic of ways on the brain. . . . If you associate orgasm with your wife, a kiss, a scent, a body, that is what, over time, will turn you on; if you open your focus to an endless stream of ever-more-transgressive images of cybersex slaves, that is what it will take to turn you on. The ubiquity of sexual images does not free eros but dilutes it.

Gary Brooks says the following about “soft-core” pornography:

Softcore pornography has a very negative effect. . . . Its voyeurism . . . teaches men to view women as objects rather than to be in relationships with women as human beings. . . . Pornography gives men the false impression that sex and pleasure are entirely divorced from relationships. . . . Pornography is inherently self-centered—something a man does by himself, for himself—by using other women as the means to pleasure, as yet another product to consume.

Consumers of pornography are not the only ones affected. The objectification of both men and women has transformed the way many people measure their own attractiveness. For example, nowadays it is common for a beautiful woman to have no concept of her beauty. She feels pressure to measure up to the airbrushed images she sees in magazines. She exhausts herself by under-eating and over-exercising, paralyzed by shame because she cannot fit into a size two. How will she ever compete with the hard-core porn goddesses on pay-per-view and the Internet, or the soft-core porn goddesses on network television and in the *Victoria's Secret* catalogs? I will never forget hearing the actress Kirstie Alley comment on pictures of herself, saying that she saw herself as “hideous” and “disgusting,” contending that being overweight makes “you loathe yourself.” This is tragic, and a deception of the highest order.

What we need is a culture of true progressives who affirm the dignity and beauty of all women, not just the skinny and sexy few. We would be wise to stop deifying the *Victoria's Secret* and GQ bodies and rethink the meaning of “sexy.” Biblically, the most interesting and attractive women and men are those whose hearts are at rest because they know that God loves them. Their beauty is from inside and is not fixated on cosmetic perfection, but on substantive character, driven by a reciprocal love for God that also frees them to love their neighbor. A strong case can be made that casual sex and objectification—self-centered lust for people in general versus self-giving love for one person in particular—are chief contributors to unparalleled divorce rates, sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, body-image depression, teen suicides, terminations of life in the womb, and little girls being trafficked and sold into prostitution. Our culture of casual sex has led to outcomes that are anything but casual. Until we learn to see people as people instead of things, as image bearers to be loved instead of objects to be used, sexuality will only become more confused and broken.

God Is in Favor of Sexual Freedom

God puts protective boundaries around sexuality just as good parents give their children protective boundaries. Our heavenly Father does not want us to hurt ourselves. However, it is unhelpful to become reactionaries and swing the pendulum to Ward and June Cleaver of *Leave It to Beaver*, who slept in separate beds, more like college roommates than husband and wife. Some people are surprised when they find out that the Bible promotes and even commands sexual pleasure. God is in favor of sexual freedom—within the bounds of marriage, as we saw earlier. In the earliest chapters of Genesis we see God creating sex and commanding Adam and Eve to fully enjoy each other’s naked bodies:

A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

The theme is continued in Proverbs, where husbands are told, “Drink water from your own cistern. . . . Rejoice in the wife of your youth. . . . Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.” Song of Solomon consists of eight erotic chapters in which a husband and wife sing and recite poetry about each other’s naked bodies while playfully scheming about how they are going to ravish each other. God, who inspired the writing of Song of Solomon, smiles from heaven at this. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, invites and even commands spouses to freely give their bodies to each other and to do so often. What kind of God would command such a thing? Yet this is precisely what the biblical God does. Anyone who thinks the Bible is stuffy about sex either hasn’t read the Bible or hasn’t been paying attention to what it says.

People who understand the Bible’s vision for sex also understand that the physical union of a man and a woman is more a sign than it is a destination. It is not an end in itself. Sex is symbolic as much as it is real. It represents a holistic approach to nakedness, full and reciprocal transparency in which man and woman are fully exposed yet not rejected, fully known yet completely embraced.

Sex also signifies our nakedness before God. Having been united with Christ, believers live in the awareness that God knows everything about us—warts and scars and all—and still loves us. God knows our secrets, the skeletons we hide in the closet, the things we are most ashamed of. He is fully aware of our worst qualities, yet tenderly says to us, “I will betroth you to me forever” and, “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” Through Christ, God carries us back to Eden where we are naked without shame, where we are received and cherished as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband on her wedding day. Sex between a husband and wife points to this ultimate union: the union between Christ and his bride, the church. It also points to the wedding feast promised to believers in the new heaven and new earth as well as the “happily ever after” we will enjoy with Jesus the Bridegroom.

Homosexuality—Yes, No, or Maybe?

In recent years in the West, there has been a growing movement supporting monogamous, committed same-sex relationships. Even within Christianity, some wish to revisit the long-held Christian (as well as Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu) belief that marriage and sex are

for one man and one woman only. Is it fair to say that only heterosexual couples can enjoy God's gift of sexual intimacy and lifelong partnership? Have we been reading the Bible wrongly on this issue for all these years? People used to think that the Bible was pro-slavery and oppressive to women. But now, after more careful study of the Bible on these matters, we know that the opposite is true. Is homosexuality a similar issue? Is it time for a reformation? Self-identified "gay-affirming evangelicals" such as Justin Lee, Rachel Held Evans, Matthew Vines, and more recently, Jen and Brandon Hatmaker, are suggesting in their books, blogs, and Twitter posts that it is. Many are listening, and many are convinced.

There are also those who, based on a careful reading of the entire Bible, remain opposed to eroticizing same-sex relationships inside the church.

I recently told a gay friend who identifies as a Christian that, sadly, I was not able to affirm his romantic involvement with the man he calls "the love of his life." This was incredibly painful to do, but when a friend asks a direct question, one must of course answer it truthfully. While unwilling to depart from the historic Christian sexual ethic, I also spoke from a place of grief and sadness because I want my friend to enjoy deep companionship and intimacy.

Thankfully, my friend was kind enough to listen to my reasoning as both of us held back tears. I think he is still processing what I said to him, which was this:

To affirm his union with the love of his life would mean I'd have to deny the Love of mine.

The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred by the Hitler regime, said that "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Christ, the love of my life, bids me come and die. He bids me to have and to hold him for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, forsaking all others, for as long as I live and into eternity.

Jesus says that anyone "who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." I am irresistibly drawn to him. I must be his disciple. So I must renounce all that contradicts him and that contradicts things that he has clearly said. But it's hard. Sometimes it puts me in a position that grieves me.

I grieve because I want my friend to be able to share life and be romantically involved with another person. I do not want him to be lonely or alone. Yet as a Christian I am bound to yield my personal feelings and wishes to the sacred words of Jesus, who affirmed that in the beginning, God made them male and female, and the man was united to the woman, and the two became one flesh.

As the biblical proverb says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." In both the Old and New Testaments, all the direct references to homosexuality echo this proverb with a tone of sober warning, with no affirmations to counter them. The issue of slavery, often cited as an apples-to-apples comparison to homosexuality, is actually an apples-to-oranges comparison. The Bible itself was a chief reason for the abolition of slavery. Texts such as Galatians 3:28 and Paul's letter to Philemon (a first-century slave owner) put a spotlight on centuries of flawed, self-serving biblical interpretation. Here, Paul insists that as a Christian, Philemon must begin treating his servant, Onesimus, with the highest esteem—no longer as a slave but as a brother and an equal. According to Bible scholar F. F. Bruce, Paul's New Testament letters "bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution [of slavery] could only wilt and die." History has proven Bruce correct, with abolitionists and civil rights leaders such as William Wilberforce, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. opposing racism and slavery not in spite of their belief in the Bible, but because of it.

Though there is still progress to be made, similar gains have occurred on the matter of women's equality. Based on Jesus' treatment of women and the many passages in both the Old

and New Testaments that elevate the dignity of women, one simply cannot make a biblical case for women being inferior to men.

Injustices such as slavery and the oppression of women have been fought against in most developed nations, largely due to a strong scriptural counter-voice that puts flawed interpretations to rest. Yet no such counter-voice can be found in the Bible that suggests a favorable view of homosexuality. For people like me who have same-sex-attracted friends, and especially for my same-sex-attracted friends themselves, this can create layers of difficulty and grief and loss and sadness. And yet the God of all comfort promises to meet us and abide with us precisely in those places. He does not invite us to censor what he has said. But he does invite us to find rest in the good that we cannot see.

This is not easy.

Some may say to a same-sex-attracted person, “Aren’t we all challenged by scriptural truths that confront our deepest desires? What makes same-sex attraction such a unique struggle? Why can’t you just accept this as your cross to bear, your unique calling from God, to remain single and celibate?” Asking this sort of question in this sort of way fails to appreciate the depth of a same-sex-attracted Christian’s struggle. When I was a single man and had no romantic options and wanted so much to be united to a woman, surrendering to Jesus meant remaining celibate . . . for a time. Even though abstinence and purity were difficult, there was always the possibility of uniting my life with someone else’s. No such prospect exists for a same-sex-attracted Christian, whose surrender to Jesus truly feels like a form of death, a lover’s version of Gethsemane. If I am going to have anything meaningful to contribute to this discussion, it must begin with a recognition that temporary celibacy pales in comparison with what many same-sex-attracted people feel is a lifelong prison sentence of suppressing libido and romantic feelings. For those who are not same-sex attracted, this conversation needs to begin with compassion and maintain compassion as its foundation. We must never presume to understand what it is like to walk in shoes we will never wear.

Yet the Scriptures remain, and the truth remains. All children of God, Jesus says, must deny themselves daily, take up their crosses, and follow him. Some people’s crosses are much weightier than others’, but all must bear a cross. In my world, the lesser crosses include my inclination to worry and my anxiety-based insomnia, both of which contradict God’s invitation to trust him. There is also my greed, which contradicts God’s promise to fulfill my every need. And there is my craving for people’s approval (even as I write this, I am fearful of how my gay and gay-affirming friends will receive it), which contradicts the favor that God has freely given me in Christ.

But God did not create me to live this way. He did not create me to accept the invitation that these confusing and broken impulses, instincts, and desires extend to me. Rather, he extends to me a different invitation: to surrender all my impulses, instincts, and desires to his lordship. Rather than entertain the idea that God created me to be fearful, greedy, and emotionally needy, he invites me to the higher ground of trusting him—trusting that his thoughts are higher than my thoughts, that his ways are higher than my ways, and that his wisdom is higher than my desires and longings. He invites me to trust that it will someday all make sense, this surrendering business, when Jesus returns to make all things new and to redeem all things confusing and broken—including my confusing and broken desires.

None of my struggles compares in weight to that of a man or woman living with same-sex attraction who surrenders, even for a lifetime if necessary to remain true to a biblical sex ethic, all romantic longings to Jesus. I have known several same-sex attracted men and women to

make that surrender. I also know several same-sex-attracted people who are faithfully married to members of the opposite sex, and for whom such faithfulness is a regular but noble struggle. I am currently pastor to several of these men and women. For many of them, the surrender was heartbreaking. But it is a surrender that each of them has considered worthwhile, not because Jesus is a roadblock to love but because Jesus is love itself.

In addition, there are others in my life who have remained married and celibate for similar reasons. These people have chosen to remain true to spouses who are relationally difficult, to spouses who have sustained a brain injury or have Alzheimer's, to spouses who are paralyzed from the neck or waist down, to spouses who are no longer physically able to have intercourse. Some of these friends are very young and are facing unique emotional, relational, and romantic challenges for the rest of their lives. And they are doing so not because Jesus is a roadblock to love but because Jesus is love itself. According to their own testimonies, these men and women have found in Jesus a love more sure, solid, enduring, and safe than any other love that would presume to compete with him.

It Is Not Good to Be Alone

If Christians are going to call their fellow Christians to heterosexual monogamy within marriage and celibacy outside of it, we must not stop there. It is necessary to go further to ensure that those who heed Jesus' sexual ethic have the support not only to succeed but also to thrive. It is not enough to say that sex outside of marriage is wrong or that erotic same-sex relationships are off limits for those who wish to follow Jesus. "The Bible says it; that settles it" is a lazy and unthoughtful approach that alienates people who long for companionship yet bear the burden of unwanted singleness and celibacy.

Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. . . . They preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger." Those who are serious about following Jesus must do more than lift a finger to alleviate the burden of aloneness in our midst. Every person—married or unmarried—must have people in their lives for support, companionship, intimacy, and human touch. We must ask the radical question of what it will take to ensure that every unmarried person has access to friendships as deep and lasting as marriage and as meaningful as sex. We must also ask what it will take for our communities to effectively cultivate such friendships.

As meaningful as sex? Seriously?

Yes, I really mean that. Have you read about David and Jonathan?

Friendship as Deep as Marriage, Community as Deep as Family

Centuries before Jesus and Paul, David and Jonathan shared a friendship that was so deep that David said, "My brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women."

Some, in an effort to defend homosexuality with the Bible, have taken this single statement from David to mean that he and Jonathan were gay lovers. There is no evidence in the Bible that suggests an erotic connection. But there is evidence of a friendship as deep and committed as that of a married couple.

We are told that Jonathan's and David's souls were "knit together," that each loved the other as his own soul. The two made a lasting covenant to always be there for each other, to have

each other's backs, and even to raise each other's children should the need arise. Just as Ruth refused to leave Naomi's side, John leaned heavily into Jesus' bosom, and Jesus promised to never leave or forsake us, David and Jonathan's friendship was intimate and enduring. Their love for each other was neither marital nor sexual. Instead of naked bodies, they had naked souls. This kind of "soul-knitting" friendship, while it does not include the pleasures of erotic love, does provide strength, solace, and permanence for unmarried people, whether male or female, homo-attracted or hetero-attracted, divorced or widowed or never married. W. H. Auden, a poet and same-sex attracted man who remained unmarried and celibate out of obedience to Jesus, illustrates this truth in an excerpt from a letter he wrote to a friend, about his friends:

There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seems more than I can bear, and if it wasn't for you, and a few—how few—like you, I don't think I could.

What if the church became the first place, instead of the last place, that people went looking for this kind of friendship? What if the church were filled with unmarried people but had no "single" people, because married and unmarried people were as family to one another—surrogate brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and sons and daughters to the rest of the church? What if the church were the place where people discovered that being unmarried is not a prison sentence but an opportunity for grace and communion with Jesus and service to God's Kingdom and mission? What if the church were the place where being unmarried was not only accepted, but seen as a high and noble calling as it was for Jesus and Paul? What if it is true that God sets the lonely in families? What if it is true that "there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for [Jesus'] sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands"? What if the church were the place where anyone in the world could find refuge and solace from the age-old malediction that to be alone is to be lonely?

This is exactly what God intends the church to be.

Jesus Christ—Single, Celibate, Sufficient—and the Point of Marriage

There are other "what ifs" to be considered. What if the main reason God created marriage and sex is not so we could be married and have sex? What if God has something bigger and more ultimate in mind—something that is accessible to all people, regardless of their marital status?

He does.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose to be single and celibate? Could it be that he was saving himself . . . for us?

A deeper look into the full biblical narrative tells a bigger story about marriage than marriage itself. According to Paul, marriage is not a be-all and end-all, but a pointer to something bigger than marriage. "This mystery [of marriage] is profound," Paul says, "and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

Paul is saying that God's design for marriage is that it is preparatory and temporary. The first and fundamental goal in marriage is for a husband and wife to prepare each other for an everlasting marriage to Jesus. The only marriage that will remain in the new heaven and new earth is the marriage between Jesus and his bride, the church.

What does this mean? It means that whether married, unmarried, divorced, or widowed now, every believer in Jesus is and will be united with him forever in the marriage that will fulfill every unsatisfied longing, every unfulfilled attraction, every missed opportunity for companionship, love, and intimacy.

As Paul says, this is all a profound mystery. But we do know that even the best day of marriage in this life will pale in comparison to the worst day of marriage to Jesus in the new heaven and new earth (as if there could be a worst day). The best sex in this life will seem boring compared to the intimacy that will be enjoyed daily between Jesus and his people. And there's more: our deepest aches, longings, and loneliness will be satisfied once Jesus sweeps up his bride into his everlasting arms.

In the meantime, will Jesus be enough for us here and now? Like an engaged couple saving themselves for the wedding night, eagerly anticipating when they will fall naked and unashamed into each other's arms, will we be able to wait for Jesus to fully and ultimately meet our deepest needs and desires?

May these words from Paige Brown, written years before she got married, be an encouragement to us:

Every problem is a theological problem, and the habitual discontent of us singles is no exception. . . . I long to be married. My younger sister got married two months ago. . . . Is God being any less good to me than he is to her? The answer is a resounding NO. God will not be less good to me because God cannot be less good to me. It is a cosmic impossibility for God to shortchange any of his children. . . . It is a cosmic impossibility that anything could be better for me right now than being single. . . . You see, we singles are chronic amnesiacs—we forget who we are, we forget whose we are. I am a single Christian. My identity is not found in my marital status but in my redemptive status. . . . I may meet someone and walk down the aisle in the next couple of years because God is so good to me. I may never have another date and die an old maid at ninety-three because God is so good to me. Not my will but his be done.

Whether homo-attracted, hetero-attracted, single, divorced, painfully married, or happily married, may we find strength, resolve, and hope as we remember that God created us ultimately for an everlasting marriage to Jesus—a marriage that can already be ours now and that will enjoy an intimacy even deeper than the marriage bed in the world to come. If the biblical vision is true, then Jesus is better than sex. His love is stronger than the strongest and deeper than the deepest of human loves.

The essay above is a chapter excerpt from Jesus Outside the Lines: A Way Forward for Those Who are Tired of Taking Sides, by Scott Sauls. Used with permission from Tyndale House.

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