

THE THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY OF
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
OF LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY AND ITS
ASSOCIATED PRACTICAL
IMPLICATIONS

SPRING 2023

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A PASTORAL LETTER

Welcome to the theological document of First United Methodist Church of Lexington KY. In the 240-year history of First Church, one of the initial expressions of Methodism planted by Francis Asbury west of the Alleghenies, our congregation has responded faithfully to God's movement and been a vital witness of Christ, impacting generations. And we are not done. There is work to do, and I am grateful you are a part of it.

So why write a theological document now? The United Methodist Church (UMC), since its inception in 1968, has continually wrestled with the interpretation of same-sex marriage: does God's will allow for the union between a man and man or a woman and woman as it does for a man and woman? This is a presenting issue at the heart of decades-long conflict within the UMC, and the denomination is now splitting as a result.

The Administrative Council of First Church decided that we needed to do more than read headlines and rely upon culturally-formed opinions to navigate the denominational unrest. They courageously insisted that neither fear nor haste would dictate our discernment. Therefore, this document is the result of years of prayer, study, and conversation; an intensive year of teaching and small groups; and six months of writing and editing. It is a labor of love from the pastoral staff, edited by the Vision Team and Administrative Council, and adopted by the Administrative Council. It is not perfect. It is not Scripture. It is not the UMC Book of Discipline. Rather, it is an internal document of First Church meant to identify who we are and where we are going.

At the center of this document is discipleship to Christ, the desire to draw us closer to Jesus and to one another. That is the sum of our mission.

But what about the question on many minds: is same-sex marriage right or wrong? You won't find that answered in this document. Some answer one way, some the other. We acknowledge that faithful people have arrived at different interpretations drawn from Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Our preparatory times of teaching and small groups showed that this question needs more prayer, study, and conversation. We do believe, however, that, over time, there will come a point where this will be a settled matter for all people and/or a place where the differences are not as important as we think they are now. We move forward standing on the promise of unity as a gift of the Spirit that leads us to greater love of Christ and one another.

So, are we simply agreeing to disagree? Hardly. That would, in some ways, be too easy and would lack discipleship impact. We are agreeing that in our disagreement there is grace and truth. Unity in Christ is the means of grace that will make this possible. Will it be easy? No. Will it be transformational? It already has.

We have been down a denominational-split road before. In 1844, our church decided it could no longer stay in the Methodist Episcopal Church and left that denomination to align with like-minded Wesleyan congregations who supported slavery. By the grace of God, in 1939 the interpretative differences surrounding slavery had settled, and we reunited with our Wesleyan family and were once again part of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Our approach with this document is an attempt to learn from our past. We find that same-sex marriage can be interpreted differently by orthodox believers of Jesus while remaining in the same church. Rather than separate and wait for interpretation to be settled before reuniting, we are committed to remain together through the messy middle. This means that we intend to remain United Methodist as long as the orthodox boundaries of faith, which are outlined in this document, are upheld by the denomination.

At this point, you may be tempted to not read this document. After all, the previous paragraphs give a summary “answer” – Stay together. Remain UMC. Continue the prayer, study, and conversations. I invite you to read it because I believe stopping would be both a mistake and a missed opportunity. This document is a launching pad for conversation, study, prayer, and even disagreement, leading to grace and truth. In our teaching times, we discovered that we need a different way of thinking and speaking about sexuality, and we provide that in this document through the lens of chastity, which has implications for everyone (married or single). The document also gives us the ability to tackle important questions about sexuality that have been found difficult and left unanswered in the church. Taking the Gospel to our cultural moment is always important work.

As you can imagine, I have read this document multiple times and each time I find something new to consider. It has led to numerous conversations. Jesus has used it to grow my love for him and for you, my church family. I am excited about the possibilities that this document offers our congregation to gain a deeper understanding of how the gifts of God, including sexuality, can be a means of grace for our growth in Christ for those who are single, married, widowed, divorced, gay and straight. It has been a means of grace in my life, and I know it can be the same for you.

Finally, this document is not an attempt to change your mind. As I’ve said, we are not even trying to reach agreement through it. What we attempt is to have an important conversation with love, respect, and unity. Your engagement with the document and one another is the place where transformation is possible. And I am convinced that your engagement is the key to answering questions on your heart and in the heart of our culture. I invite you to do just that.

All my best,

Todd
Senior Pastor, First Church

THE THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY OF FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

Preamble

The One, Holy, and Apostolic Church has affirmed the boundaries of the faith to include the two testaments of Holy Scripture, the three creeds: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, the decisions of the four ecumenical councils, and the first five centuries of church history and the teachings of the church fathers in that period. First United Methodist Church of Lexington, Kentucky affirms this historic definition of faith. In addition, we affirm the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's dual nature as well as the 25 Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church (Appx A).

Disagreement among faithful Christians on matters of theological essentials is not new. For instance, the early Church struggled to find unity over the question of whether one must become Jewish in order to be Christian. The New Testament describes church leaders wrestling with that question, holding space for God to reveal himself, and ultimately declaring that one could be either Jewish or Gentile to be a member of Christ's Church. The early Christians looked for a way forward that allowed for the mutual edification of the Christian community. Instead of an all-or-nothing decision, the Church asked both Jews and Gentiles to examine how they might take up their crosses for one another, loving one another in the midst of intense disagreement.

Discerning theological essentials, living into the unity of the Church, and taking up crosses for one another has been the consistent task of the Church throughout her history. On what matters must the Church be of one mind? On what matters must the Church debate charitably and rigorously? And on what matters may the Church leave discernment to the individual Christian?

This division between essential matters of the faith, important doctrinal commitments, and matters of individual conscience can best be described with the following categories:

Dogma: Dogmata are those matters which are essential for those who would call themselves Christian. Dogma is revealed by God and affirmed and clarified universally by the Church in her tradition. Dogma is testified to in the Holy Scriptures and clarified by the four ecumenical councils and three creeds. The trinitarian nature of God, the divinity of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the nature of the Spirit are all matters of dogma. Dogma unites us together as the Holy Church (§6). These matters are entirely settled.

Doctrine: Doctrine is of great importance, but it is not essential for Christians to agree uniformly on doctrinal matters. The nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the choice to baptize infants, and even the precise understanding of Christ's atoning work on the cross are

all matters of doctrinal debate. Though doctrines are matters of great significance and have been the impetus for many Church separations and divisions since the East-West Schism of 1054, faithful Christians can disagree on doctrine and yet still understand one another to be part of the Holy Church. Doctrines are largely settled within their respective theological traditions, though there is room for debate and discussion more broadly.

Belief: Beliefs are matters which are not essential either for the Holy Church or even denominational affiliation. The mode of baptism (e.g. sprinkling, pouring, or immersion), the mode of receiving holy communion (e.g. intinction), the frequency of holy communion, and the style of worship are all examples of matters of belief. Beliefs are settled in the context of local churches where individual Christians work out together how they will live into their different commitments.

The ongoing discussions around human sexuality in the United Methodist Church represent a doctrinal and dogmatic confusion. Some believe the current matters at hand regarding sexual ethics are matters of dogma and, as such, justify identifying those who dissent as no longer Christian. Others believe these matters are matters of doctrine and, as such, justify separation into denominational or organization structures away from those with whom they disagree. Still others believe these matters are best discerned by the local church and do not see them as justification for separation.

Adding to the confusion is an uncertainty of which doctrinal and dogmatic matters are currently at stake. The debate about sexual ethics touches on other debates within the Church including the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the nature and character of God, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the sanctifying role of the Spirit, the resurrection of the body, and other important matters. There often exists confusion about what a given local church will believe and practice should they make a particular theological declaration about sexuality.

We, First United Methodist Church in Lexington, Kentucky, write and affirm this document to clarify our theological commitments, to articulate diverse matters of theology, and to provide a theological vision in which to live as we seek to love God and our neighbor. As we clarify who we are theologically, we are committed to a deeply charitable method and praxis of wrestling with theological differences (Appx B).

In all of this, we pray to our triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—that we might receive and practice the wisdom of God, remain steadfast in our love for God and for one another, and be great stewards of the manifold grace which God has so generously given to us.

§1. The Nature and Character of God

God is the cause of all created things—whether in heaven or on earth, whether visible or invisible, and nothing exists except for God himself and what comes from him. No aspect of the universe is independent from God, for God is Lord of All. The heavens are his, and the earth also; God founded the world and all that is in it (Ps 89).

God is everywhere, knows all things, and can do all things. In the heights and the depths, in darkness and in light, God is present (Ps 139). All hearts are open to God, all desires known. God searches every heart, examines every mind, and knows any anxious thought (Jer 17; Ps 139). God is the source of all goodness, truth, and beauty, and every good and perfect gift comes from God himself (Jas 1; Ps 104).

God is triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is three distinct persons in one perfect relational unity. In the trinity, there is absolute equality. No person of the trinity is greater than another person of the trinity nor is any single person of the trinity anything less than the trinity itself.

God is love, which is his reigning attribute that illuminates the glory of all his other perfections. Love is undivided in the Godhead; there exists no division of love (e.g. *eros*, *agape*) in the Trinity. Love is God's pure gift, and all love finds its source and its end in God himself. In the words of St. Augustine, love is so much the gift of God that it is called God, and the one who does not love does not know God (1 Jn 4).

§2. The Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit

God, the Father, is the creator of heaven and earth. The Father is uncreated spirit (Jn 4) and, being incorporeal and immaterial, has neither sex nor gender. As St. Gregory of Nazianzus teaches, the term Father refers neither to who God is nor to what God does but rather refers distinctly to the relationship between the Father and the Son. Consequently, because of the relationship between the Father and the Son, the term Father also refers to the relationship between the Father and all of humanity (Gal 4; Jn 14). This relationship gives us the confidence to pray to God our Father in heaven and ask of the Father anything we need (Mt 6; Jn 15).

The Son is the Word made flesh, God incarnate, Jesus Christ. Christ is the full revelation of God. We know who God is and know God's character because of who Christ is. He was begotten of the Father before all ages, not created (Jn 1). He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born from Mary, who was a virgin (Mt 1; Lk 1). Christ is one person with two natures, fully divine and fully human. Christ's dual nature is without confusion, unchangeable, indivisible, and inseparable. Each nature is preserved in the one person of Jesus Christ.

Christ is the second Adam. Where Adam was disobedient, Christ was obedient to the Father unto death (Phil 2). Christ was tempted in every way and yet did not sin (Heb 4). As the full revelation of God, Christ is perfect love. Christ proves his love for us that though we were sinners, he died for us (Rom 5; Jn 15). Through his obedience and sinless perfection, Christ reveals to us what it means to be human and enables us to love perfectly as he loves perfectly.

Through his suffering, death, and resurrection, Christ has conquered sin, hell, and death itself. Christ serves as the first fruits of the resurrection and is the sign of God's covenantal faithfulness (§5). Christ ascended into heaven and is currently seated at the right hand of the Father. All wicked rulers and all of Christ's enemies are being brought under his rule and reign, and Christ will return on the Day of Judgment to judge the living and the dead (1 Cor 15; Jn 5).

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth who comes forth from the Father, the Spirit of righteousness, and directing Spirit (Mt 12; Jn 15; Ps 50; Job 33). The Holy Spirit is without body, purely immaterial, and indivisible. The Spirit is infinite in power, unlimited in greatness, and immeasurable by time or ages. The Spirit is the source of holiness, of love, and of life. The Holy Spirit is both deeply personal, dwelling within the heart of every Christian, and universal, available to all.

After Christ ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost in the creation of the Christian community, the Holy Church. Through the power of the Spirit, divisions of language, ethnicity, and social status are torn down and all are one in the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells within the Holy Church and in the hearts of each one of Christ's followers, stirring up our affections for one another and drawing us closer together into one family. The work of the Spirit is ongoing as the Spirit leads the Church to her future where every tribe, people, nation, and tongue will live together in perfect harmony (Rev 7).

§3. Creation and Humanity

In the beginning was the Word, the Son of God, who was with God and who was God (Jn 1). In him, all things were created, whether heavenly or earthly, visible or invisible, whether powers, rulers, or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him (Col 1). God is the source of all goodness (§1), and in his act of creation, God begrudges nothing its existence. He does not compete with his creation. All things exist and continue to exist as a pure gift from God.

The Son is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church (§6). He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead (§5). He is the firstborn over all creation. The creation and perfection of humanity finds its beginning and end in the person of Jesus Christ. Humanity is always defined in relation to Christ—any understanding of human personhood must be derived from our understanding of Christ.

Humanity was created in God's image as an act of pure grace. God blessed humanity with the responsibility to care for the created world and all of the creatures of the earth (Gen 1). When God created humanity, he created them male and female (Gen 1; Mt 19). There is no generic human, but rather, humanity is marked by sexual difference. It is a difference, not an opposition—a relation without hierarchy, a mystery to explore.

Created in the image of the triune God, humans are relational and interpersonal. We cannot know ourselves but through our relationship to God and our relationship to one another. Humans are communal and social, and it is through language that we learn to express ourselves and gain understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Humans are storytelling creatures who understand themselves through metaphors, stories, and rituals.

Humans are embodied creatures. The habits and practices of our bodies—e.g. the movement of the body in worship, the use of our senses, the giving and receiving of affectionate touch—make up a vital part of our existence. Humans are emotional, cognitive, and imaginative creatures who were created to create and cannot help but seek to understand themselves and the world around them. All self-understanding emerges as an interpretation of a complex interplay among a person's emotional, imaginative, and thought life in relationship to God and to other human beings.

At the core of every person is desire—a desire to be loved and to love others. In the words of St. Augustine, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Affected by sin (§4), humans are capable of great evil as our desires for love can be twisted and perverted affecting our thoughts, emotions, imaginations, and bodies. The unregenerate human—the human who has not yet repented and received the gifts of salvation offered—has a darkened mind and can only see the great love of Christ as foolishness (1 Cor 1; Rom 1).

Despite the effects of sin, desire and a capacity for love of God and neighbor always remain. Humans can pursue wicked ends or pursue wicked means toward good ends, but a longing for love always remains as it is a sign of God's prevenient grace—grace that always goes before.

Eros is love in the flesh that finds its source and its end in the triune God. Because desire is at the core of every person, because humans are fundamentally relational, and because humans are a creative, complex interplay of emotion, imagination, thought, and bodily experiences, we respond to the presence of another and our desire for them in a variety of different ways.

Sexuality is an entire range of conscious and unconscious, relational and personal ways of responding to erotic desire including patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior. Sex is a particular way of navigating erotic desire. At its ideal, sex brings with it vulnerable intimacy and

loving connection. It is through sex that male and female can become co-creators with God and can produce life. Sex is not the only way of responding to erotic desire nor is it the end of erotic desire.

Chastity, like all virtues, is rooted in perfect love of God and neighbor. To practice chastity is to navigate all the complexities of erotic desire and to order one's thoughts, affections, and behavior toward perfect love of neighbor and love of God. It is to hold every thought captive and to search the depths of one's heart. It is to seek council in personal spiritual direction or to discern with the Body of Christ. Chastity is to honor the personhood of another including caring for their physical bodies and holding limits on their behalf, to respect covenantal commitments including commitments to family, community, and God, and to take responsibility for another which extends to responsibility for children as a potential result of sex. In this way, chastity extends beyond an ethic of mutual consent and challenges overly individualistic approaches to sexual ethics.

Chastity is not the prohibition of sex. Chaste marriages include sexual relationships where partners embody the highest ideals of mutuality, where they honor and respect one another's bodies, and where they live out their covenantal commitment to one another, all to the glory of God. Chastity is not the absence of desire. Those who are celibate—those who abstain from sexual activity whether temporarily or vocationally (e.g. taking formal vows of celibacy)—creatively navigate the complexity of erotic desire in non-sexual ways. Chaste celibates have a responsibility to stay tender-hearted as they remain open to the complexities of desire. Thus, we uphold chastity in its historic definition, not its modern connotation of abstinence or virginity.

Chastity is, most importantly, exemplified by our Lord Jesus Christ who is himself perfect love in the flesh. By becoming human, Christ transforms our fallen human nature into a beautiful embodiment. Christ was merciful to adulterers and celebrated the faith of prostitutes (Jn 8; Mt 21). Christ touched others and was touched by them (Mk 5; Jn 9). The disciple whom Jesus loved was free to recline on him (Jn 13).

§4. Sin, Death, and The Fall

Through the disobedience of Adam, sin entered the world, death came through sin, and death spread to all because all have sinned. Original sin is the inheritance, physical and spiritual, of the fall. It is the truth that all are touched by the effects of sin. Because all are touched by the effects of sin, humans cannot save themselves (Rom 5).

The effects of sin extend far beyond the individual human. Because humans are social, political, and cultural creatures with the capacity to create systems and structures, these, too, are affected

by sin. Through the participation of sinful humans and spiritual forces of evil, these corrupted systems and structures produce what John Wesley refers to as complicated wickedness and complicated misery. In other words, sin can have far reaching and long-lasting consequences.

On the individual level, sin, properly speaking, is the willful violation of a known law of God—the law of love (1 Jn 3). Sin is the worship of the creature rather than the creator (Rom 1). Sin is the failure to love God and to love others. At its base, sin is the turning of the self inward, away from God, and is to claim as one's own the good gifts that God has given.

Sin has no existence in itself but is always a perversion of the good. For example, vengeance is a perversion of justice and wrath is a perversion of righteous anger. Through repentance and in receiving Christ's righteousness and the presence of the Holy Spirit, a Christian is freed from the reign of sin, re-oriented back to God, and empowered to love perfectly as Christ loves perfectly—even while still living in a fallen world.

Sexual sin is the perversion of erotic love and includes anything which falls short of perfect love of God and perfect love of neighbor. God communicates the seriousness of sexual sin throughout the Holy Scriptures in, for instance, the gift of the law (Lev 18), the condemnation of entire cities (Gen 19; Ez 16), the judgment of his appointed king (2 Sam 12), and the construction and correction of early Christian communities (1 Cor 6). Because all of Scripture testifies to the love of God and neighbor (Mt 22), at base, sexual sin includes acts which depersonalize another or depersonalize one's self, acts which violate covenants, and acts which refuse responsibility for another. Sexual sin also includes the habits of one's mind as well as certain forms of speech (Mt 5). It is the responsibility of the Church to interpret Scripture, construct theologies, and develop liturgies to cultivate cruciform love—love which is modeled after the cross—in all aspects of life, including, especially, matters of sexuality (§6).

§5. The Resurrection of the Body and The Day of Judgment

The resurrection of the body is the work of God's justice, judgment, and covenant faithfulness. The hope of every Christian centers firmly on the resurrection—the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the future resurrection of the dead—and without it, our faith is meaningless (1 Cor 15). After the disobedience of Adam, sin and death seized humanity (§4). Death became the last tool of the tyrant, the enemy of God which separated humanity from him and that which the wicked used to destroy the righteous. By raising Christ from the dead, God dealt death its final blow and declared victory. Now, nothing separates us from the love of God (Rom 8).

Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection. Raised from the dead, he is currently reigning at the right hand of the Father. He is bringing all things under his rule and reign, breaking the power and dominion of all wicked rulers (Eph 1). Once all things are brought under him, he will turn it

all over to the Father on the Day of Judgment. On this day, the dead will be raised and judged by God himself. The wicked will be knocked off their thrones, the righteous will be clothed with the imperishable, and death will be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15).

The resurrection of the body points to the great reversal of injustice which will be found in the new heavens and the new earth. Whereas in our current world, wicked and oppressive rulers persecute the righteous, on the Day of Judgment, those oppressors will be judged and the righteous will inherit the kingdom (Dan 12). The hope of the resurrection is why we Christians can live a cruciform life (§6). We do not fear humans who can destroy our bodies but rather worship the God who has the power to raise our bodies from the grave.

It is in the resurrection of the body that we will find all of our desires rightly ordered and fully realized. What is marred in us now will be fully redeemed in the resurrection. Just as the creation narratives in Genesis bear witness to humanity's relationship with God unmarred by sin, so, too, in the new creation, will we find our relationship with God unmarred by sin. No longer will we be separated from our God, but having been gifted transformed and redeemed bodies, we will worship our Lord face-to-face.

§6. The Holy Church and Church Tradition

Though there have been many different Christian communities and traditions across time and place, there is one universal Church because there is one baptism (§8) and one Lord. Each local gathering of Christians is an expression of the one holy Church. At baptism, we are brought into the Body of Christ which cuts across ethnic, social, and political divisions. Through the Eucharist (§8), the Holy Spirit truly unites each of us to the one body—uniting us all to one another and uniting us to the one head, Jesus Christ.

Because Christ has conquered death (§5), he overcomes the division between the living and the dead. In our unification with Christ through the sacraments by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are united with all the saints of the universal Church. When we worship our Lord, when we pray, when we receive the Eucharist, we do so with God's people on earth and all the company of heaven. This is the communion of saints.

Our unification with the Body of Christ across geography, language, and social division as well as across time and death allows us to learn from and grow with the saints across the world and throughout history. Though we belong to the Wesleyan tradition, we seek guidance from Christians across the Church Universal. We see the teachings of the early church not as outdated, ancient relics nor as sacred texts but as vital teaching responsible for clarifying the foundations of the faith. On the particular matters of marriage and sexuality, we value the teachings of the

early church in helping us to understand what is at stake in theological questions of desire, virtue, and embodiment (§9).

Because erotic desire is so central to human personhood (§3), the Church has taken great care to concern herself with the ethical questions of sexuality throughout her history. Because the Church is tasked with caring for the formation of her members, it is the responsibility of the Church to develop theologies to understand the complexity of sexual life, to construct liturgies to help Christians develop chastity, and to bring order to sexual discernment.

To be a member of the Church Universal is to be Christ's body for the world. The primary means through which the Church exhausts the power of evil within the world and loves as Christ loves is through the cruciform life, a life modeled after the cross. Unlike earthly institutions who primarily use force to coerce and to control, the Church follows Christ in not returning evil with evil but meeting evil with gentleness, peace, and love (Mt 5). The Church collectively and her members individually are tasked with bearing our crosses for the sake of God, one another, our neighbors, and our enemies (Mt 16).

The Church is neither passive nor do we delight in our own suffering. Christ does not coerce us to bear our crosses but invites us to voluntarily surrender (Mt 10; Jn 10). The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing because it appears to them as weakness, involuntary submission, and failure. Once transformed by the Holy Spirit, we delight in the passion of our Lord and seek to faithfully serve him by taking up our crosses (Phil 3). The hallmarks of the cruciform life center on the prophetic naming of evil as evil, patient suffering, and generous forgiveness. In doing so, we imitate our Lord who did not call down violence from heaven (Mt 26) and forgave even those who crucified him (Lk 23). Through the Church's patient suffering and steadfast charity, God brings about his justice within the world and points to the final advent of his Kingdom (§5).

The Church is not just a purified spiritual reality but, on this side of the Day of Judgment (§5), also includes what Scripture refers to as goats among the sheep and weeds among the wheat (Ez 34; Mt 13). Goats and weeds do not refer to those moving onto perfection but rather refer to those in the church who appear to be members of the body but who are in fact schismatics, those who intentionally divide the Body of Christ through backbiting, gossip, false teaching, and other vicious behavior. Unity through cruciform love is the posture of the Church Universal, even to those who attempt to divide the body. The separation of the goats from the sheep and weeds from the wheat is reserved for God alone (§5).

§7. Holy Scripture

Holy Scripture is the Word of God to and for the people of God. The canonical texts of the Old and New Testaments are not simply historical records nor simply a collection of ancient wisdom but rather are the medium through which the triune God addresses his covenantal community.

Holy Scripture is both natural and supernatural. The words of Scripture were composed, edited, distributed, copied, and transmitted by the covenantal people of God across centuries and in varying social, historical, and cultural contexts. Holy Scripture did not emerge from a generic humanity but rather emerged particularly from God's covenantal people.

Holy Scripture is an instrument of divine revelation, and divine revelation is divine presence. In reading Scripture, we do not simply read historical texts, poetry, prophecy, and law but actually encounter the very presence of the triune God. Every encounter with Scripture is an encounter with Christ, the Word of God, gifted by the Father and mediated through the work of the Spirit. Through Scripture, God communicates all that is necessary for salvation.

The revelation of God in Holy Scripture is a freely given and uncoerced gift from God. Consequently, no interpretive method of Scripture can exhaustively comprehend God's revelation, and God cannot be forced to reveal himself outside of his divine will. As a gift, the Church receives what God has chosen to reveal and allows him to disrupt and challenge our interpretations.

Through Scripture, God overcomes human opposition and estrangement and replaces them with knowledge, love, and fear of God. Holy Scripture is authoritative for the life of the Church; it is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3). Through Scripture readings in public worship, private devotional readings, small group bible studies, liturgies, and preaching, the Holy Spirit works to help us to know God through Scripture and more deeply love him.

Proper interpretation of Scripture always builds up one's love of God and neighbor, corrects false teaching, and edifies the Body of Christ. Diversity of interpretation within the bounds of love of God and neighbor reflects the beautiful mystery of God's self-revelation as well as the diverse gifts of the Church.

§8. Baptism and Holy Communion

The sacraments are an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. They are instituted by Christ, a gift to the Church, and are a means of grace. The sacraments represent Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and all who repent and put their trust in Jesus Christ are

invited to receive them. We recognize two sacraments: baptism and Holy Communion (also called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist).

The Triune God is the actor in the sacraments. The sacraments are a means of grace not because of the character of the one presiding over them nor of the one receiving them but rather they are efficacious because of the generosity of God. The sacraments are gifts that God has given to the Church, and God has permitted the Church stewardship over them (Mt 18).

Baptism is the initiatory sacrament through which we enter into covenant with God and become a member of the Church Universal (§6). The sacrament involves the renunciation of evil, the confession of faith, and vows—both to the Church and from the Church. The act of baptism begins with the blessing of the water—a symbol of life, death, and purification. In the blessing of the water, we recall the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of creation and the waters of Mary's womb. Christ himself sanctified the waters of baptism by accepting John's baptism and made them be for us waters of purification and of reconciliation with God. In the sacrament of baptism, one is baptized into the death of Christ—putting to death all sinful self-reliance, receiving the remission of sins, and fully surrendering to Christ himself. In dying to self, one is united with Christ in new life and is now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, unified with Christ as a member of his body.

In baptism, the one baptized exchanges vows with God and with the Church or has vows made on their behalf. We recognize sprinkling, pouring, or immersion as valid methods of baptism. Because God is the actor in baptism, we baptize professing believers as well as young children and infants who have vows made on their behalf. Catechesis—formal instruction in the dogma and doctrine of the Church—either precedes the baptism of professing believers or occurs prior to a public profession of faith later in life for those baptized as young children or infants. This later profession of faith is called *confirmation*, where the Spirit confirms the work of the Church and the regenerating grace of God in the one previously baptized.

Holy Communion is the sacrament through which Christ gifts his very body to the Church and through which the Holy Spirit unites us to that body (§6). In the sacrament, we recall the Last Supper of our Lord who, on the night he was betrayed, presented bread and wine in thanksgiving to God and gifted them to his disciples as the sign of the covenant of God (Mt 26; Mk 14; Lk 22; Jn 13). In the Eucharistic liturgy, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of bread and wine on the table are consecrated and become the real presence of Christ himself. In receiving the gifts God has offered at the table, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a living sacrifice and feast on the bread of heaven which endures forever (Jn 6). The gift of the Eucharist is offered to all, both those who receive in reverence and thanksgiving and those who do not. The former receive the gifts to their benefit and the latter to their condemnation (1 Cor 11).

The Eucharistic liturgy represents a foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth. In worship, through the power of the Spirit, Christians leave the currently earthly reality behind and enter into the very presence of God with all the saints of the Church (§6). The Eucharist is the sign of our communion with God and with one another. It is the means through which the Holy Spirit unites us to one another and to Christ Jesus. The gift of the Eucharist requires repentance and confession and evokes gratitude and thanksgiving. In the words of St. Bonaventure, the Eucharist should not only signify communion and love but also be the means for their invocation.

The material elements of the sacraments—water, bread, and wine—remind us of the gifts of our bodies and our fundamental created material reality. When we touch the water in our baptismal font and eat the bread from the table, we are reminded that God values his created world and is redeeming it. The gift of Christ's body in an act of self-giving love in the Eucharist enables us to give of our very bodies in love for God and one another.

§9. Marriage and Family

Christian marriage is unique in that it exists within the tension of our current world and the world to come. We refer to this tension as *eschatological* because it is a tension which concerns itself with the new heavens and the new earth (§5). Christian marriage is situated between the promises of companionship and the command to work and procreate of Genesis 1 and 2 and Christ's prophetic words in Matthew 22 that in the new heavens and the new earth, there will be no marriage. Thus, this tension rightly defines the proper end of erotic desire as chastity (§3) and allows for depth of relationships outside of marriage (§10) while also celebrating the real goods of marriage.

The witness of the Holy Scriptures on the topic of marriage is complex. In the Old Testament, the laws of the Torah and the narratives which surround them articulate a view of marriage which is primarily concerned with passing along the family name, increasing offspring, bequeathing and maintaining property, and ensuring care for the vulnerable and marginalized. As early as Genesis 16, we witness the diverse Old Testament presentation of viable family structures representative of their unique social, political, and cultural context. From Hagar's role in Abraham's story to Boaz's redemption of Ruth and Naomi, there is a concern and anxiety for the future, whether distant or imminent, whether a dynasty will continue or a family will have food the next day. This uncertainty of life gives rise to various family structures in the Old Testament, including foreign servants taken as concubines, multiple wives taken from the same family, children given over to the temple service, powerful men claiming women as their own, and political marriages which consolidate power.

While the realities of Old Testament family structures are complex and culturally-bound, the prophets begin to offer a different vision. When they speak of the relationship of God and Israel,

they describe Israel as an unfaithful wife and God as a faithful husband. As the most dominant metaphor for the woes at hand, the prophets use the idea of fidelity and monogamy to call Israel back to faithful worship. The prophets call the Israelites, in relationship to their God, to something they don't fully practice in their everyday lives. Yet, it sits as the vision and is held in tension without a premature resolution.

In the centuries which pass between the Old Testament and New Testament narratives, we know very little about many of the changes in practice among the people of Israel (though we know a great deal about the geopolitical shifts in the world at this time). However, one of the significant shifts among Israel is toward monogamy. With the move from a Semitic tribal culture to a life lived in the Roman empire, the impetus to care for one another seems to move from the family to the nation. It is no longer simply the responsibility of the family to seek flourishing; it is the duty of the whole nation, especially those with power and influence.

The New Testament describes a narrowing picture of what marriage might look like as Jesus arrives and teaches and preaches within Israel, which is now also steeped in Greco-Roman culture. Jesus uses stories of husbands and wives to talk about holiness. Like the prophets, he uses the language of fidelity and care to describe the character of God. Jesus calls people to a deep commitment to one another and then points to the eschatological reality that, ultimately, human marriages will not be the reality of the resurrection. Instead, our relationships will be once more wholly-defined by our orientation toward God as they were at creation.

Many of the New Testament letters were pastors writing to specific churches, addressing the particular problems of those communities. They do so with an expediency that comes from the common belief that Jesus' second coming was imminent. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul recommends celibacy and allows marriage only for those too weak to remain celibate (1 Cor 7). He encourages them to see marriage as a dividing force which takes one's attention away from God. Yet, in the letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul appeals to those married to practice a mutual submission which counter-culturally bears witness to the self-emptying love of Christ (Eph 5). Finally, the Revelation of St. John draws heavily on the prophetic witness and the eschatological tension of Jesus and the apostles, using the image of the harlot for the evil empires of the world, the image of a pure bride to represent the church, and the image of the groom to explain Jesus' relationship to the church (Rev 17).

In the law, prophets, gospels, epistles, and apocalypses of the Holy Scriptures, there is an acknowledgment of same-sex sexual activity as existent within the broader society. There is great debate over the vocabulary and meaning at each instance (Lev 18, 20; Rom 1; 1 Cor 6; 1 Tim 1). At each point, the New Testament authors operate within their particular context at the intersection of Jewish, Grecian, and Roman culture and worldview. Each culture brings its understanding of what happens in marriage and sexual activity. The New Testament authors

speak exclusively of marriage between people of the opposite sex. They preach and write and pastor within a context that has a significantly different understanding of what is at stake with marriage. The concept of monogamous same-sex covenantal marriage is not present at the time of the writing of the New Testament.

Because of the eschatological tension of Christian marriage and the complexities of the scriptural testimony, the Church has not taught a singular theology of marriage. Rather, in different eras of church history, theologians, pastors, and leaders have brought forth different theologies of marriage according to each era's unique political, social, and cultural contexts.

This is especially true in the early church where church fathers argued over definitions of marriage. For instance, St. Clement of Alexandria, known for his early philosophical defenses of Christianity, argued that to be a faithful Christian, one must be a good Roman citizen—one must marry and have children. Alternatively, St. Jerome, known for his translation of the Bible into Latin, his extensive commentaries on Holy Scripture, and his status as the second most prolific writer of the early church, argued that Christians ought to be deeply suspicious of marriage, live according to strict codes, and avoid all occasions for sexual attraction.

The church fathers also disagreed over the significance of sexual difference (§3), particularly how it pertains to marriage. St. Gregory of Nyssa, a major contributor to the second ecumenical council and to the finalization of the Nicene creed, argued that sexual difference came after the Fall. He argued that it was imposed by God to keep humanity alive after our exile but was neither fundamental to human nature nor did it have any eschatological meaning. Alternatively, St. Jerome argued that the dogma of the resurrection of the body (§5) can only be true if sexual difference *remains* at the resurrection. For Jerome, sexual difference was fundamental to human nature even as he remained suspicious of marriage. Occasionally, a church father would change his mind depending on his context. For instance, in his early works, St. Augustine, one of the Church's most prolific theologians, argued that sexual difference had primarily a spiritual and metaphorical significance, but in his later works, he argued that sexual difference was fundamental to marriage because, for Augustine, marriage carried with it a mandate to produce children.

The early church fathers were creatively free to construct theologies which teased out the implications of Holy Scripture and took seriously the gift of the body and its offering to God (§3). Nonetheless, within the theological diversity of the Church, a few core themes persist. Christian marriage is a covenantal union which reflects the covenant of God and the Church (Eph 5). Christian marriage is a site for developing virtue, particularly chastity (Eph 5; 1 Cor 7). For instance, in the words of St. John Chrysostom, the family is a little monastery where spiritual formation and growth primarily occur. Christian marriage also requires fidelity (1 Tim 3; Mt 19; Mk 10) for it reflects God's covenantal faithfulness.

Because marriage is a political, social, and cultural category, Christian marriage also brings with it political, social, and cultural responsibilities and challenges. Throughout church history, Christians have included in their theologies of marriage and sexuality a particular concern for the tempting allure of status, wealth, and prestige which can come with marriage and family life as well as concern for the challenges of continuing to care for the widow, the stranger, and the orphan who often exist outside of political, social, and cultural institutions.

The construction of nuanced theologies of marriage and sexuality is one of the primary demands put before the Church today. These theologies must take seriously God's self-revelation through Holy Scripture (§7), the teachings of the early church (§6), the complex political, social, and cultural contexts of both the ancient world as well as those of the contemporary world, and the discipleship needs of the present moment (§3). These theologies must bear good fruit, leading people to repentance and to charity and chastity. On matters of sexuality, the witness of Holy Scripture is complex and the work of the early church is appropriately diverse. We remain aligned with the historic work of the Church in recognizing that, unlike dogma, the questions of sexuality and marriage are not entirely settled. There is indeed space to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of Christian marriage, to explore the complexities of eroticism and sexuality in Christian life, and to discern the role of Christian marriage in our current context as a means of developing virtue, particularly as it pertains to same-sex couples.

§10. Friendship and Community

As members of the Holy Church, we are not bound by genealogy, social status, political arrangement, or cultural affiliation but rather, we are united in the Body of Christ by the love of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. Because our primary affiliation is to the Church, we are freed to leave aside the earthly anxieties of power and politics where we store up treasures on earth only for them to be destroyed by nature or stolen by others (Mt 6). Instead, we are free to live into the values of the Kingdom of Heaven, cultivating that great love which will permeate the new heavens and the new earth.

Christ defines friendship and the sacrifices it requires as the greatest love (Jn 15). Because there will not be marriage in heaven (Mt 22) and because the proper end of erotic desire is chastity (§3), Christians can cultivate deep intimate friendships both in and outside of marriage. Christian friendship is not a relationship of convenience. It is not a relationship of utility. It is not based solely on shared activities. Christian friendship also does not rely on reciprocity nor does it demand to be requited.

Rather, fundamentally, Christian friendship imitates Christ in that it is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily

angered. It does not keep a record of wrongs. Christian friendship does not delight in evil but rejoices in truth. It always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres (1 Cor 13; Prov 17). In the words of St. Aelred of Rievaulx, though challenged, though injured, though tossed into the flames, though nailed to a cross, a friend loves always. One of the primary means of exhausting the evils of the world and producing charity within the world is through the active cultivation of Christian friendship within the Holy Church.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OUR THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY

We are committed to using this Theological Statement to allow the Administrative Council to guide and align our congregation to any future denominational changes. We will seek to be in a denomination that aligns with our theological identity. Therefore, while we do not know what the General Conference 2024 or future General Conferences hold, at this point, we remain committed to the United Methodist Church.

APPENDIX A - THE CREEDS

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic* church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the Only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,

Of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son
is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic* and apostolic church.
We confess one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Athanasian Creed

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic* faith.

Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic* faith:

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity,
neither blending their persons
nor dividing their essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person,
the person of the Son is another,

and that of the Holy Spirit still another.
But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,
their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has.

The Father is uncreated,
the Son is uncreated,
the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is immeasurable,
the Son is immeasurable,
the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.

The Father is eternal,
the Son is eternal,
the Holy Spirit is eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal beings;
there is but one eternal being.
So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings;
there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.

Similarly, the Father is almighty,
the Son is almighty,
the Holy Spirit is almighty.

Yet there are not three almighty beings;
there is but one almighty being.

Thus the Father is God,
the Son is God,
the Holy Spirit is God.

Yet there are not three gods;
there is but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord,
the Son is Lord,
the Holy Spirit is Lord.

Yet there are not three lords;
there is but one Lord.

Just as Christian truth compels us

to confess each person individually
as both God and Lord,
so catholic* religion forbids us
to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone.
The Son was neither made nor created;
he was begotten from the Father alone.
The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten;
he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers;
there is one Son, not three sons;
there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.

Nothing in this trinity is before or after,
nothing is greater or smaller;
in their entirety the three persons
are coeternal and coequal with each other.

So in everything, as was said earlier,
we must worship their trinity in their unity
and their unity in their trinity.

Anyone then who desires to be saved
should think thus about the trinity.

But it is necessary for eternal salvation
that one also believe in the incarnation
of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully.

Now this is the true faith:

That we believe and confess
that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son,
is both God and human, equally.

He is God from the essence of the Father,
begotten before time;
and he is human from the essence of his mother,

born in time;
completely God, completely human,
with a rational soul and human flesh;
equal to the Father as regards divinity,
less than the Father as regards humanity.

Although he is God and human,
yet Christ is not two, but one.
He is one, however,
not by his divinity being turned into flesh,
but by God's taking humanity to himself.
He is one,
certainly not by the blending of his essence,
but by the unity of his person.
For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh,
so too the one Christ is both God and human.

He suffered for our salvation;
he descended to hell;
he arose from the dead;
he ascended to heaven;
he is seated at the Father's right hand;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
At his coming all people will arise bodily
and give an accounting of their own deeds.
Those who have done good will enter eternal life,
and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the catholic* faith:
one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.

Chalcedonian Definition

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach all to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in humanity; truly God and truly human, of a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead, and co-essential with us according to the humanity; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures,

inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning have taught concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

**universal*

The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church

Article I—Of Faith in the Holy Trinity

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Article II—Of the Word, or Son of God, Who Was Made Very Human

The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took human nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin; so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and humanity, were joined together in one person, never to be divided; whereof is one Christ, very God and very human, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of humans.

Article III—Of the Resurrection of Christ

Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of human nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all at the last day.

Article IV—Of the Holy Ghost

The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God.

Article V—Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation

The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any person that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament of whose authority was never any doubt in the church. The names of the canonical books are:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, The First Book of Samuel, The Second Book of Samuel, The First Book of Kings, The Second Book of Kings, The First Book of Chronicles, The Second Book of Chronicles, The Book of Ezra, The Book of Nehemiah, The Book of Esther, The Book of Job, The Psalms, The Proverbs, Ecclesiastes or the Preacher, Cantica or Songs of Solomon, Four Prophets the Greater, Twelve Prophets the Less. All the books of the New Testament, as they are commonly received, we do receive and account canonical.

Article VI—Of the Old Testament

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to humanity by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and humanity, being both God and human. Wherefore they are not to be heard who feign that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.

Article VII—Of Original or Birth Sin

Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every human, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby humanity is very far gone from original righteousness, and of their own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.

Article VIII—Of Free Will

The condition of humanity after the fall of Adam is such that a person cannot turn and prepare themselves, by their own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.

Article IX—Of the Justification of Humanity

We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith, only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.

Article X—Of Good Works

Although good works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and spring out of a true and lively faith, insomuch that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree is discerned by its fruit.

Article XI—Of Works of Supererogation

Voluntary works—besides, over and above God’s commandments—which they call works of supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety. For by them people do declare that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for his sake than of bounden duty is required; whereas Christ saith plainly: When you have done all that is commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants.

Article XII—Of Sin After Justification

Not every sin willingly committed after justification is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore, the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification. After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and, by the grace of God, rise again and amend our lives. And therefore they are to be condemned who say they can no more sin as long as they live here; or deny the place of forgiveness to such as truly repent.

Article XIII—Of the Church

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful persons in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

Article XIV—Of Purgatory

The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardon, worshiping, and adoration, as well of images as of relics, and also invocation of saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but repugnant to the Word of God.

Article XV—Of Speaking in the Congregation in Such a Tongue as the People Understand

It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the primitive church, to have public prayer in the church, or to minister the Sacraments, in a tongue not understood by the people.

Article XVI—Of the Sacraments

Sacraments ordained of Christ are not only badges or tokens of a Christian’s profession, but rather they are certain signs of grace, and God’s good will toward us, by which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm, our faith in him. There are two Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord.

Those five commonly called sacraments, that is to say, confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony, and extreme unction, are not to be counted for Sacraments of the Gospel; being such

as have partly grown out of the corrupt following of the apostles, and partly are states of life allowed in the Scriptures, but yet have not the like nature of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, because they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God.

The Sacraments were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon, or to be carried about; but that we should duly use them. And in such only as worthily receive the same, they have a wholesome effect or operation; but they that receive them unworthily, purchase to themselves condemnation, as St. Paul saith.

Article XVII—Of Baptism

Baptism is not only a sign of profession and mark of difference whereby Christians are distinguished from others that are not baptized; but it is also a sign of regeneration or the new birth. The Baptism of young children is to be retained in the Church.

Article XVIII—Of the Lord's Supper

The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, but rather is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death; insomuch that, to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ.

Transubstantiation, or the change of the substance of bread and wine in the Supper of our Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ, but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.

The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper, only after a heavenly and spiritual manner. And the means whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is faith. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshiped.

Article XIX—Of Both Kinds

The cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the lay people; for both the parts of the Lord's Supper, by Christ's ordinance and commandment, ought to be administered to all Christians alike.

Article XX—Of the One Oblation of Christ, Finished upon the Cross

The offering of Christ, once made, is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifice of masses, in the which it is commonly said that the priest doth offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, is a blasphemous fable and dangerous deceit.

Article XXI—Of the Marriage of Ministers

The ministers of Christ are not commanded by God’s law either to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage; therefore it is lawful for them, as for all other Christians, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve best to godliness.

Article XXII—Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches

It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and human manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word. Whosoever, through their private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church to which they belong, which are not repugnant to the Word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, that others may fear to do the like, as one that offendeth against the common order of the church, and woundeth the consciences of weak brethren.

Every particular church may ordain, change, or abolish rites and ceremonies, so that all things may be done to edification.

Article XXIII—Of the Rulers of the United States of America

The President, the Congress, the general assemblies, the governors, and the councils of state, as the delegates of the people, are the rulers of the United States of America, according to the division of power made to them by the Constitution of the United States and by the constitutions of their respective states. And the said states are a sovereign and independent nation, and ought not to be subject to any foreign jurisdiction.

Article XXIV—Of Christian Goods

The riches and goods of Christians are not common as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as some do falsely boast. Notwithstanding, every person ought, of such things as they possesseth, liberally to give alms to the poor, according to their ability.

Article XXV—Of a Christian’s Oath

As we confess that vain and rash swearing is forbidden Christians by our Lord Jesus Christ and James his apostle, so we judge that the Christian religion doth not prohibit, but that one may swear when the magistrate requireth, in a cause of faith and charity, so it be done according to the prophet’s teaching, in justice, judgment, and truth.

APPENDIX B - A THEOLOGICAL VISION FOR DISAGREEMENT

How do we respond when the values which we hold so closely are critiqued by another who does not share the same commitment? How do we discuss deeply-held moral convictions with those who, at best, simply do not understand or, at worst, make accusations against our character? How do we disagree charitably? Is there a way to overcome an impasse when our differences feel so fundamental?

Much of the debate around the question of sexuality within the church today can be framed as the conflict between two basic moral positions. On one hand, there are those who believe that moral values are unconditioned, universal principles which are independent of social, political, and historical realities. These are Christians who believe that moral values exist outside of time and can be arrived at through rational argumentation. These are Christians who often declare that the Church has always held particular moral values and that early Christians have always been uniform in their theological commitments. On the other hand, there are those who believe that moral convictions are products of social, political, and historical realities and that different contexts bring with them different values. These are Christians who believe, for instance, that the biblical authors and early Christians had historical biases which prevented them from speaking to contemporary moral issues. These are Christians who often point out the varying ways in which church leaders have not been uniform in their beliefs, highlighting the ways in which doctrines have changed and transformed throughout church history.

Those who believe in unconditioned, universal moral values desire to be faithful to difficult truths which cut against the values of the present culture. They fear that the Church risks reducing biblical interpretation to individual subjective experience and consequently risk voiding the Holy Scriptures of all truth. Alternatively, those who believe that moral values are historically-conditioned desire to be faithful to the historical nature of Christianity, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the contextual reality of human nature. They fear that the Church risks becoming cold-hearted and deadened to the experiences of the marginalized in favor of pure abstract moral principles.

These two positions are indeed incompatible and irreconcilable. This impasse is why many have cited irreconcilable differences and deep-seated distrust at the center of debates on sexuality and see schism as the only solution. However, thankfully, both of these moral positions only conceptualize moral convictions *in part*. By re-thinking how the Church addresses issues of truth and morality, we can overcome this impasse and begin theologizing anew.

Moral convictions do not emerge by way of abstract argumentation. They are also not the result of socialization or determined solely by one's upbringing. In fact, we do not choose our convictions. Rather, our convictions choose us. Moral convictions are gifts from the Spirit, and

they seize us before we are even aware of them or able to put them into words. Moral convictions are self-evident to us, bring with them powerful emotions, and initially operate on a pre-reflective and pre-linguistic level. In other words, moral convictions are things we *feel* before we are able to think about them or talk about them.

For example, a woman who decides to foster children does not come to this decision by analyzing statistics or reading a philosophical or theological treatise, though these things might strengthen her convictions. She is not rationally argued into fostering nor is she unintentionally socially conditioned into it. Rather, she is seized by her conviction. She might hear another tell a story about fostering or she might see the face of a foster child or she might belong to a local community which celebrates fostering. One day, the moral value of fostering convicts her. Deep within her spirit, she knows that fostering is good and right. She knows she must do this. This conviction is not a flimsy opinion which she could take or leave but is rather a demand she knows she must follow. Her conviction does not arrive fully-articulated and formed—she may not be able to defend herself to friends who make pragmatic critiques or who pathologize her desires to care for foster children. She will need a faithful community that can support her in fostering by providing food, clothing, and emotional support as well as help her to better articulate and understand her moral conviction. There may be times she more closely embodies this fostering conviction but the moral value remains for her.

Moral values emerge in much the same way as faith does. Faith is not something into which one is argued. Faith begins first as an experience with the triune God and then seeks understanding. The cultivation and theological elaboration of faith within Christian community is necessary for the flourishing and growth of faith, but the seed is always the Lord's (Mt 13).

The above illustrates how moral values emerge and what is necessary for their understanding and practice. But what about moral impasses? What about those moments where the moral values of one person appear starkly at odds with the moral values of another?

Because moral convictions emerge from powerful emotional experiences which cannot always be easily articulated nor understood, a certain type of rational discourse is immediately ineffective. We are not argued into our own moral positions, and we only articulate and understand them after we are convicted by them. Because this is true, we cannot argue another person out of their convictions or directly challenge their articulation and understanding. This mode of debate only increases resistance to conversation and further entrenches a person in their position.

Instead of direct debate, moral impasses require a form of **storytelling** to help expand upon important moral convictions, to clarify moral positions, and to aid in mutual understanding.

Narrative is at the heart of Christianity. The Holy Scriptures are filled with the stories of God's relationship to his people. Creation, the fall of humanity, the covenantal work of God, the creation of the people of God, the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church, and the prophetic vision of the future kingdom of God all powerfully form us beyond simple rational argumentation. In our liturgical practices, in the rhythms and routines of our faith communities, in our personal prayer and devotional life, and in our Sunday Schools and small groups, we tell and retell the story of God and the story of us, his people, and are continually formed by these stories.

Sharing stories regarding our own particular moral values allows us to capture the complex context in which moral values emerge and allows us to clarify what is at stake for us or others in particular moral convictions. For instance, a man who publicly vents about pharmaceutical companies and shares the occasional conspiracy theory about them might in a private conversation share about his younger brother who after a routine surgery became addicted to opioids and died of an overdose. While a person is fixated on critiquing the accuracy of the man's conspiracy theories, they miss what is truly at stake for the man and risk further entrenching him rather than exploring with him how he might more faithfully live out his convictions and values.

Moral values are always good (§1) and one need not fear their exploration. The original seed planted by God might sprout too quickly, become scorched by the sun, or be choked by thorns. The explanations a person offers for their values might be superficial, exaggerated, or destructive requiring careful elaboration and nuance—much as faith requires robust Christian teaching. However, the original moral conviction can be understood through story and can be further elaborated upon if the conversation partners show one another charity. Reasoning and rational argumentation can be helpful at this point to clarify why certain moral convictions are valuable, the limitations of certain moral convictions, and how to properly live them out.

Charity in moral conversations around sexuality within the church today is what has been sorely lacking. There are many different moral convictions regarding sexuality which require more care and concern than we have often given them. Moral convictions are often reduced down to accusations of bigotry and homophobia or hedonism and sentimentalism. The narratives of Holy Scripture are often reduced to blunt instruments to clobber our enemies or discarded out of hand as inconsequential to contemporary discussions.

This document marks not the end of debate but rather its renewal. As members of a community of faith, we have a responsibility to share the stories of our own moral convictions around sexuality and to hear the stories of others. We must share the stories of adultery, abuse, sexual isolation, addiction, and persecution. We must value the real convictions of our fellow Christians and seek understanding. By shifting the ways we discuss moral issues, we can discover what is

truly at stake in conversations on sexuality and explore new creative ways of overcoming impasses and working together. We become a people with stronger moral convictions, more nuanced and complex moral convictions, and stronger community relationships. In all of this, God's glory is revealed and God's love is made more manifest in our lives and community.

APPENDIX C - THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE LOCAL CHURCH TO A DENOMINATION

Denominations are networks of churches with shared theological commitments and particular accountability structures. They provide collective responses to systemic problems which no single local church could do on its own. They mobilize resources, train up clergy, equip church leaders, disseminate teachings, plant new local churches, and provide other important work for the benefit of the local church. Denominations are earthly institutions, and as such, they can be created, sustained, dissolved, or vanish with time. They can become administratively-bloated, bureaucratically-inefficient, and, at times, even spiritually-corrupt. Periodically, a local church must re-evaluate its relationship to a denomination in order to faithfully serve it, reform it, and, if necessary, leave it.

Theology is not determined by denominational vote nor magisterial pronouncement. Theology is a response by the people of God to the work of the triune God. Theology begins first with a demand outside of us by God to know him, and it ends with an increased love for God and neighbor. We are a socially, politically, and culturally-formed people who have, with gladness and thanksgiving, received from the tradition of the Church. God has revealed himself and is revealing himself to us through the Holy Scriptures, in Church history, through his creation, and in our everyday lives. It is our repeated task to examine our theological commitments and practices, cast out our idolatrous theological concepts, renew our minds, and restore right worship within our communities. We do not live in fear of theological examination because we are confident God will correct any false teaching and lead us to the truth through the work of his Holy Spirit.

Denominations require renewal and reform. Reform is a fundamental component of the protestant tradition signified in the motto *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, or *the church reformed, always reforming*. Disobedience to the leadership of the church has long been an aspect of church life and always requires discernment. Sometimes disobedience has led to great transformations for the church, such as in the case of Martin Luther, and at other times, it has greatly harmed the church, such as in the schismatic acts of heretics.

In our modern era, the implementation of formal policies and increased administrative oversight have often been the response to denominational disobedience and ignorance. Yet, these are not the only responses available. In fact, bureaucratic solutions such as these can obscure the responsibility of local churches to seek denominational reform and can limit the imagination of local churches to construct creative ways to be a witness to their denomination. St. Augustine, in his writings against the Donatists, provides an invaluable model for reforming earthly institutional structures when he argues that faithful Christians ought to put up with the ignorances and frustrations of those they have deemed as weeds among the wheat and bear

wrongs patiently, that faithful Christians ought to provide robust theological defenses and have robust public theological debates, and that faithful Christians ought to be watchdogs, loudly defending those persecuted by those enemies of Christ's glory. The unity of the church must never be abandoned on account of another's sins but rather we ought to bear our crosses for one another, being careful to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4).

APPENDIX D - DOGMA, DOCTRINE, AND BELIEF: WHERE DOES AN ISSUE FALL?

Situating theological matters within the Dogma, Doctrine, and Belief taxonomy requires clarity of what is being discussed. We can't talk about "baptism" as a singular topic. Instead, we must speak of particular parts of a broader theology of baptism and situate them appropriately within the taxonomy. Most theological issues have either upstream or downstream connections that require us to 1) think both broadly and very specifically, 2) explore relationships between parts, and 3) wrestle with the implications. The following table demonstrates just a few of the complexities.

Topic	Dogma	Doctrine	Belief
Trinitarian Theology	"We worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence." ¹	-	-
Communion	-	The nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist (transubstantiation ² , consubstantiation ³ , holy mystery ⁴ , memorial ⁵)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Types of the Elements: Bread, wafers, chicklets · Reception: Intinction, receiving both separately, receiving one kind
Baptism	In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (reflecting trinitarian baptism over and against baptism in the name of Jesus only ⁶)	Believer's baptism vs. infant baptism	Immersion vs pouring vs. sprinkling
Christ's Atonement	"He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures." ⁷	Christ's atonement is limited to the divinely elect vs. available to all.	One particular theory of atonement as the primary focus over and against another. ⁸
Marriage	-	Is marriage a covenantal relationship between two adults (one male and one woman vs. simply two adults)?	Is marriage a covenantal relationship between two adults (one male and one woman vs. simply two adults)?

The situation of marriage within this taxonomy is one of the primary issues at hand. Can churches that disagree on marriage remain together, or does the disagreement require separation? A group has said this is a doctrinal matter and that disagreement requires separation beyond the local church. This group primarily comprises individuals who believe marriage is between one man and one woman. This group represents approximately 50% of the United Methodist Church as of the 2019 General Conference.

¹ From the Athanasian Creed

² Catholic view

³ Lutheran view

⁴ United Methodist

⁵ Baptist

⁶ Baptism in the name of Jesus only is primarily found in Oneness Pentecostalism.

⁷ From the Nicene Creed

⁸ Some churches emphasize the substitutionary work of Christ. Others his victory over sin and death. Others his moral example.

At the same time, the other approximately 50% of the United Methodist Church felt that same-sex marriage was a matter of belief and did not warrant separation. This understanding was seen in support of the One Church Plan and the Connectional Conferences Plan, which had some allowance for divergent theological understanding and practice while maintaining denominational unity. These plans were supported by those who understand marriage as between one woman and one man and those who supported allowing same-sex marriages.

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