



by Thomas Jay Oord

I face a Church of the Nazarene trial in late July 2024 for being queer affirming. I'm charged with teaching against the Church of the Nazarene's statement on Human Sexuality. I'm LGBTQ+ affirming; the denomination is not. I'm also charged with conduct unbecoming of a minister for arguing the denomination should be fully inclusive. I fully affirm queer people; I want the denomination to do the same.

To prepare, I've written a lengthy defense. I've decided to publish it before the trial to make my arguments available to the public and not just the jurors.

To start *My Defense*, I offer a brief history of how I changed my mind on LGBTQ+ issues. The excerpt below comes from that narrative . . .

I changed my mind about "homosexuality" in 1994.

What many now call "LGBTQ+" or "queer" people and issues were in the 1990s usually subsumed under the single word "homosexuality." Questions about gender and sexuality were emerging in unprecedented ways in popular culture at that time. Those questions were rarely discussed in the Church of the Nazarene, however, the holiness group into which I was ordained a few years earlier (1992). To my knowledge, the issues were never discussed in denominational forums, except in condemnation.

In a Nazarene Theological Seminary course on religious education (taught by beloved professor Ed Robinson), two classmates and I decided to tackle "the homosexual question." Those classmates: Dana Hicks and Reg Watson. We used the Wesleyan quadrilateral to frame our exploration, a conceptual tool that uses scripture, reason, experience, and tradition to address issues.

As I read the scholarship on the 6-8 biblical passages used to "clobber" queer people, I realized they did not apply to most queer issues in the modern world. Those who claim the Bible opposes homosexuality were also ignoring key texts about diverse sexual identities and expressions. The Bible was not as clear as I had been led to believe.

I began to wonder what principle I should use to interpret the Bible, particularly passages related to queer concerns. After all, almost no one thinks every Scripture verse applies today. Even those who do privilege some passages and downplay others. Few people, for instance, worry about wearing clothing of the same fabric, although there's a passage that forbids such attire. Few people think being left-handed is wrong, but there's a passage condemning it.

Furthermore, some practices considered essential earlier in history came to be thought nonessential. Take *circumcision*, for instance. Numerous biblical passages support circumcision as a nonnegotiable for God's people. But the church eventually decided it was not required for Christians. And several biblical passages reject women leadership in the church. But a growing number of Christians, especially in the Church of the Nazarene, think those biblical passages do not apply today. Other passages reflected the patriarchal assumptions of the authors, assumptions we rightly reject today.

A question arose: *What interpretive principle—“hermeneutic”—should I use to make sense of the Bible?*

The Wesleyan theological tradition provided an interpretive principle, and I used it then and still use it now: **love**. When interpreting the many voices of scripture, **love should be my guide**. More specifically, love ought to be the lens through which I thought about sexual matters. Love is central to Jesus' life and teachings, and I think it's the major theme of the Bible.

I had an idea of what “love” meant, but it took a few years to come to a robust definition. I came to believe that to love is to act intentionally, in relational response to God and others, to promote overall well-being. To love like Jesus, we should seek the **flourishing of all**, especially the marginalized, poor, and vulnerable. **Love does good**.

Hicks, Watson, and I wrote a massive paper for Robinson's seminary class back in 1994. We argued that the Bible, as a whole, is not opposed to loving same-sex intimacy. “Homosexuality” can be healthy, we said. The experiences of many queer people point to positive elements in queer identity, orientation, and behavior. The only strong element in the quadrilateral against queer issues and people was the Christian tradition. But we found research that even questioned whether the tradition consistently opposed same-sex attraction and behavior.

Living a life of love is my primary purpose. It's the center of what it means to follow Jesus and be in Christian community. With Jesus and the writers of scripture, I think love matters most. With John Wesley, I believe love is the heart of holiness. Those who embrace queer people often claim, like I do, that love motivates them to be fully LGBTQ+ affirming.

When I talk to those who do not fully affirm queer people, I rarely hear them appeal to love. Most non-affirming people employ a particular way of interpreting biblical passages they think apply to contemporary queer issues. This interpretation justifies, in their minds, opposition to queer behaviors, identities, and issues. A few will also appeal to the historical church when opposing LGBTQ+ people and issues.

Some who embrace the current Manual statement on human sexuality claim to love queer people. They say they “**love the sinner, but hate the sin,**” which means they think same-sex behavior or non-hetero-normative identity is sinful. Their opposition to queer people is, as they put it, “for their own good.”

I appreciate the claim that love seeks what's good. After all, to love is to act intentionally, in relational response to God and others, to promote overall well-being. I've written about this often, including in my book *Pluriform Love*. **Love aims for flourishing.**

But the claim to want what is good for queer people while simultaneously opposing their healthy sexual behaviors, orientation, and identities makes no sense. It is not loving.

The Bible does not support well the non-affirming view. Biblical scholars have addressed these issues in books and articles. (See bibliography in *My Defense*.) But I want to mention other problems with claiming to love queer people while opposing them and their allies.

First, people who love well **listen**. Loving queer people means taking their queer testimonies into account when discerning what love asks of us. True listening means affording dignity to those who speak and being open to changing one's mind.

The vast majority of LGBTQ+ people insist that to love them well means to affirm their identities, orientations, and healthy sexual behavior. Those who claim to love queer people while ignoring what queer people say are not loving well.

They're not listening.

Second, **love seeks well-being**. It seeks what Jesus called “abundant life” and biblical writers call “blessedness,” “*shalom*,” or “eternal life.” The overwhelming scientific consensus is that queer people can experience well-being while embracing their queer identities and orientations.

According to Appendix paragraph 923 in the Manual, Nazarenes are supposed to be “*open to scientific explanations....*” According to the scientific consensus, same-sex sexual behavior can be healthy. Committed same-sex relationships can promote blessedness, wholeness, and flourishing.

Third, I find that most non-affirming people do not have close relationships with queer people. They don't know well those whose “lifestyle” they don't affirm.

John Wesley was right to argue that **it's difficult to love well those about whom we know little**. Many are also misinformed, and some are fed misinformation by religious leaders.

While non-affirming folk think they love, queer people don't experience them as loving.

The identities, orientations, and sexual behavior of LGBTQ+ people *can be* healthy.

I say “can be” not “is always” healthy, because I'm not saying queer people are morally perfect. But heteronormative people are also not perfect. At stake, of course, is what it means for sex and sexuality to be “healthy.”

In broad terms, “healthy” pertains to activities that promote well-being in various ways. Healthy sexual identities, orientations, and behaviors promote what's good, beneficial, or flourishing. Healthy sexuality enhances us psychologically, socially, and physically. Same-sex sexual behavior that's healthy can include the romance, pleasure, and intimacy sometimes found in healthy opposite-sex sexual behavior. I advocate for sexual healthiness within the context of a committed relationship or (when possible) marriage.

I know LGBTQ+ people who experience the sanctification described in Article 10 of the Manual. They are sanctified.

They have been transformed “into the likeness of Christ,” are “made free from original sin, or depravity,” have been “brought into a state of entire devotement to God,” express “the holy obedience of love made perfect,” enjoy the “infilling of the Holy Spirit,” experience “cleansing from sin,” are “empowered for life and service,” “grow in grace as a Christlike disciple,” improve “in Christlikeness of character and personality,” are “participating in the means of grace, especially the fellowship, disciplines, and sacraments of the Church,” and grow in “grace and in wholehearted love to God and neighbor.”

Unhealthy sexuality is manipulative, non-consensual, and harmful to bodies and relationships. Rape, bestiality, and pedophilia are unhealthy. Such sexuality hurts, isolates, leads to pain, and strains relationships. But “queer” is not the same as “unhealthy.” Both straight and queer people can engage in healthy or unhealthy sexual behavior.

Healthy queer sexual relationships promote a high quality of life.

The condemnation of LGBTQ+ people causes them great harm. Conversion therapy, for instance, rarely if ever helps, and it most often hurts. Queer people face excessive violence. Sometimes this treatment leads homophobes to kill queer people; other times, it leads queer people to take their own lives. Queer people are far less likely to attempt suicide if the communities in which they live accept them.[2]

LGBTQ+ people are also more susceptible to mental health problems because of the social, emotional, and religious condemnation they face. One study shows that when families reject their LGBTQ children, those children are 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide, 5.9 times more likely to have high levels of depression, and 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs than LGBTQ children with supportive families.

The Church of the Nazarene’s statement on human sexuality does not help queer people. It can easily justify their mistreatment. When the church does not embrace queer identities, orientation, and healthy sexual behavior,

abusers believe violence against queer people is warranted. The Manual statement on human sexuality supports homophobia.

Rather than help, the statement on human sexuality hurts LGBTQ+ people.

I believe Jesus loves queer people and celebrates their healthy sexual expressions. I also believe Jesus would seek changes to the denomination's Covenant of Christian Conduct. He would speak out, boldly calling for repentance, standing for the marginalized. Jesus would do so even if it made His critics angry and brought discomfort to His district superintendent.

This means that, in our context, Jesus would likely be given a Bill of Charges and brought to trial in the Church of the Nazarene. Like me, Jesus would be considered "divisive" and charged with "promoting an agenda contrary" to the denomination. Accusers would say He "taught and promoted ideas, beliefs, and doctrine out of harmony with" the denomination's view of human sexuality.

Ironically, Jesus would not be brought to trial by a group that bears His name.

Having realized I should be what we today call "affirming," I faced another question:

Could I stay in the Church of the Nazarene?

Sources Cited

[1]. In some respects, same-sex partnerships are healthier, on average, than traditional ones. See the John Gottman study on same-sex relationships: <https://www.gottman.com/about/research/same-sex-couples>

[2]. "The Trevor Project: 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health," <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>

[3]. See "Parents' rejection of a child's sexual orientation fuels mental health problems," March 2009, Vol 40, No. 3 Online: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/03/orientation>