



Sacred Covenants, Faithful Conversations,

A DVD resource for talking
about marriage equality

Brief Discussion Guide

Recommend for use by pastors, lay leaders, and group facilitators.

This discussion guide is designed to help groups debrief from viewing the DVD, *Sacred Covenants, Faithful Conversations*.

For a more comprehensive study resource on marriage equality, use *God Is Still Speaking about Marriage*, recommended by General Synod 25. *God Is Still Speaking about Marriage* is available for free download from the internet at www.ucc.org/justice/marriage.htm.

A printed version of *God Is Still Speaking about Marriage* is available for purchase from United Church of Christ Resources, call toll free: 800-537-3394.

When using this DVD video program, the following suggestions may be helpful:

- ✓ Preview the *Sacred Covenants, Faithful Conversations* with sensitivity to the “culture” of the group with whom you plan to show it. You may wish to view it more than once.
- ✓ Read the discussion guide and decide what will work best for your group.
- ✓ Plan how you will structure your time and adapt the discussion process as needed. For example, you may choose to screen the video once, engage the group in discussion and then, screen the video again. People will often see or hear things they missed the first time, or perceive things differently after some discussion.
- ✓ Create a sense of sacred space for viewing the program and engaging discussion using prayer, readings, meditations, and symbols, such as candles.
- ✓ Create safe space by sharing a community covenant or ground rules the group agrees to for how they will speak and listen to each other.

Group Process for viewing and discussing the video program

Before Viewing

1. Open with prayer and/or a brief meditation or reading that will help set the tone for a respectful and open conversation.
Suggested Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13
2. Facilitate the creation of a covenant or ground rules for your discussion. It is often helpful to give participants the opportunity to contribute to this. Here are some suggested items for the covenant or ground rules.
 - Always share your concern and beliefs
 - Listen carefully to others
 - Be willing to examine your own beliefs in light of what others say
 - Speak your mind freely, but strive to maintain an open mind
 - Strive to understand the position of those with whom you disagree
 - Cooperate with the leaders to keep the discussion on track
 - Don't monopolize the discussion
 - Address remarks to the group and not at an individual
 - Communicate your needs to the leaders
 - Value your own experience and opinions
 - Engage in friendly disagreement: avoid emotional argumentation, yelling and personal put-downs
 - Remember that humor and a pleasant manner can go far in helping you make your points
3. Discussion questions before viewing the program:
 - ❖ Why do people get married?
 - ❖ What are the qualities of a good marriage?
 - ❖ Why is marriage important to you?
1. After viewing the video program, take a few moments for quiet reflection.
2. Ask viewers to share their initial impressions of the program.
3. In the program, a variety of views about marriage are expressed, what are some of the perspectives about marriage that you heard in the program?
4. What are some places of common ground from which to begin this conversation?

Marriage and the Bible

5. The Bible is an important part of any church discussion on marriage. Read and discuss the article by Paul Hammer, *Taking the Bible Seriously*. (see Discussion Resource)
6. Discuss some of the significant biblical issues raised in the program and how these issues impact the conversation about marriage: You may wish to include:
 - ❖ English translation
 - ❖ The ancient world and our own
 - ❖ The creation stories in Genesis 1-2
 - ❖ Jesus and marriage
 - ❖ Scripture often used at weddings (e.g., 1 Corinthians 13, Ruth 1:11-18)
7. Discuss the following question from the video program:
Does our ethic for marriage come from the marriage practices of ancient biblical cultures, which change and evolve over time, or from the biblical values for all relationships, which by their nature are timeless?

View the Video Program

Sacred Covenants, Faithful Conversations

After Viewing

Civil Rights and Church Rites

8. What is the role of government concerning marriage? You may wish to discuss:
 - ❖ The legal marriage license which provides couples and their children access to the legal rights, benefits and responsibilities of marriage
 - ❖ The rights provided in the U.S. Constitution: equal protection under the law, the right to privacy, freedom of religion, and separation of church and state
9. Discuss the comment by Congressman Sherrod Brown who says that it isn't the role of government to tell any religious institution what marriages to perform. What is he saying about the difference between the role of government and the role of religious institutions in terms of marriage?
10. What are some of the legal rights, benefits and responsibilities that come with legal marriage? What are some of the real consequences faced by couples whose relationships are not legally recognized?
11. Discuss the following quotes. What do you think and why?
 - ❖ Bob:
The legal aspects of marriage are important... if you redefine that term, then you have to redefine all the benefits and legal obligations. So why not keep the term "marriage" and then automatically the civil rights come in – fall into place – in any kind of relationship.
 - ❖ Paul:
The words gay and marriage do not belong together. Call it something else.

Kate:

Five years ago I would have said civil unions are great, that's fine, it's all the same thing. And as I watched that political discussion unravel ...playing with those words is so clearly about continuing to hold a group as second class – that marriage is this sacred thing that only heterosexual couples can have. They wore that out for me and now it has to be marriage. Civil union is just another way of setting us apart.

❖ Sue:
I think it just goes back to how I view God's plan for marriage and I'm uncomfortable in opening that up or changing that. ...I understand that homosexual couples have needs like heterosexual couples, and rights, you know, they ought to be protected and share some of the benefits and so forth...

❖ Holly:
We contribute to society, our kids go to school, we pay taxes, we tithe, we do the things we know to do in terms of being a good human being, and yet, there's this group out there that wants to say that because of the person that I love, somehow my life isn't worth the same thing as someone who's in a heterosexual relationship.

Closing

1. Take a few minutes to quietly reflect on what you have experienced from viewing the video program and the group discussion. Then, those who wish may share with the group one new or surprising thing they learned.
2. Identify any next steps for following-up on the discussion.
3. Share a closing prayer, benediction, reading or brief meditation that affirms the sharing and listening process.

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Discussion Resource

Taking the Bible Seriously: Paul Hammer

by Dr. Paul Hammer,

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Dr. Hammer gave this introduction to the Bible study at the 2000 Dunkirk Colloquy.

Where shall we begin Bible study? In one way, it is quite unbiblical to begin with the Bible. Biblical writers generally do not begin with an exegesis of texts, but with the reality of their situations. Then they tap into their traditions and texts to help them meet the situations they face in their faith communities and in their worlds.

As a former colleague of mine says, "The word became flesh, not text." And when it comes to texts, we know that no interpretation of a text can ever be absolutized, for the only Absolute is neither the Bible nor the Church but the living God.

One of my favorite stories about biblical interpretation is about two boys whose mothers were ministers. They were arguing about whose mother was the better preacher. Said the one, "My mother can take the same text and preach a different sermon each Sunday." "That's nothing," said the other. "My mother can take a different text and preach the same sermon each Sunday."

Perhaps there is a bit of truth in both. No text is ever exhausted by any one sermon. And every text finally points to the saving love of God for everyone in God's beloved world.

Bible's unity is enriched by its diversity

What I would like to do is to offer what I see as the interpretive or hermeneutical contexts generally of biblical writers themselves, though of course we cannot fit

all these writers, who span a thousand years of Hebrew Christian history, into one mold. The diversity of biblical writers is quite amazing, but what would one expect from the multiple struggles they faced over such an extended period of time? Any biblical unity is enriched by such diversity.

Obviously, there is no one way to articulate such interpretive contexts, but I would suggest the following: a *cosmic* context, and *ecclesial* context, a *canonical* context, and *evangelical* context, and a *pneumatic* context.

World-embracing context

First, a *cosmic or world-embracing context*. (*Kosmos* means "world.") Biblical writers embrace the realities of their worlds and their situations where they and their communities find themselves. Do they, like we, really have any other choice than to begin where we are?

Further, I find it instructive that the way in which the biblical writings are put together in our Bible places them in the context of

creation in Genesis at the beginning and of new creation in Revelation at the end. Thus the Bible as a whole has this cosmic or world-embracing context. As you and I come to this colloquy, we bring our cosmic contexts: our personal lives, our interpersonal relationships, our work, our leisure, our economics, our politics. We bring the glory and the tragedy of life in our

world. We do our Bible study in a cosmic context.

Community-of-faith-participating context

Second, an *ecclesial or a community-of-faith-participating context*. (*Ekklesia* means the "called-out" assembly, the church.) Biblical writers were part of communities of faith, even when as prophetic persons they had to challenge their own communities. These faith communities were communities of worship, of instruction, of supportive fellowship, of wider mission in that cosmic context of which they were a part. Their life in an ecclesial context intended to guide and nourish and challenge them to be faithful in the larger cosmic contexts of their worlds.

We too bring to this colloquy our life in the faith communities of our churches, with their worship, their education, their fellowship, their ministries and missions. As early Christians prepared for their world-embracing mission, says Luke, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Parenthetically, I find it interesting that here Luke says nothing about preaching! Life within the faith community calls for *teaching*. For Luke, *preaching* is for those who have yet to hear "the good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Someone once said that sometimes we seem to speak to the church as if it were the world and to the world as if it were the church.

Teaching is more for the ecclesial context. Preaching is more for the cosmic context. At any rate, we do our Bible study in an ecclesial context.

Bible-engaging context

Third, a *canonical or Bible-engaging context*. Though the earliest biblical writers may not yet have had their scriptures, they did have their oral traditions. These traditions and

the biblical writings that emerged from the communities of faith during a thousand years became canonical for Israel and the Church. From among other writings, these, taking several centuries of usage, finally became the canon or "measuring stick" to engage them again and again to inspire and challenge and keep them on course, though these writings hardly spoke with one voice as they engaged their ecclesial as well as their cosmic contexts.

In fact, an important aspect of the biblical writings is the way scripture can challenge scripture and point to an ongoing interpretive process. The canonical context points to both content and process, and thus the Bible canonizes both the writings themselves and the dynamically continuing process of interpretation. In Matthew's witness, Jesus himself carried on that process repeatedly with the words, "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you." He can challenge ancient texts with fresh interpretive power. As we compare biblical writings, we can see this interpretive process continuing at many points. In other words, it is quite biblical to challenge the Bible. For example, we would certainly want to challenge this text: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks!" (Ps. 137:9).

It holds even for the Bible (as someone has said), "None of us is entirely useless. Even the worst of us can serve as horrible examples." The great authenticity of the Bible is that it's all there, the good and the bad, the glory and tragedy of human life. It's no put up job where everything fits into a simplistic mold. As we do Bible study, we do so in the canonical context of the whole Bible.

Gospel-happening context

Fourth, an *evangelical or gospel-happening context*. Why bother with the Bible? Because the Bible as canon witnesses to the Word that became flesh, not text, that is, to the *evangel*, the "good news" of God's working

in real human existence to touch it with creative and liberating and healing power. I am grateful that one of the uniting churches in the United Church of Christ bore the name "evangelical," which comes directly from the Greek word *euangelion*.

I am quite unhappy with those Christians who define themselves as *the* evangelicals, as if other Christians are not. All Christians are by definition evangelicals, for we all have our life in God's evangel, God's good news. Our life has to go on in an evangelical context.

We sometimes limit the evangel to what God has done in Jesus Christ, but Old Testament writers also use the term. More than five hundred years before the coming of Jesus, Isaiah writes, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation" (Is. 52:7).

The whole Exodus event is "good news" for Israel. The Ten Commandments are preceded by the grace and good news of God's liberation. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; (therefore) you shall have no other gods before me". (Ex. 20:2-3).

And it is striking that the Apostle Paul can interpret his scripture (our Old Testament) in this way: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you'" (Gal. 3:8). What here is the good news for Paul? It is the good news of God's inclusiveness in the promise to Abraham.

An evangelical context means that we live with the expectation that good news will happen to people, to communities, to God's beloved world: that God's good news for the world will bring a deeper sense of faith and hope and love, of freedom and justice and peace, of grace and truth and glory –

the glory of God's self-giving love in the cross of Jesus Christ.

We do our Bible study in an evangelical context, in the expectation that God's good news will take on flesh among us as we live together in our canonical, ecclesial and cosmic contexts.

Spirit-empowering context

Fifth, a *pneumatic* or *Spirit-empowering context*. Biblical writers speak of God's spirit or Holy Spirit in differing ways (Isaiah is not Jeremiah and Jeremiah is not Ezekial; Paul is not Luke and Luke is not John.) We need to let each speak for themselves. But generally, the Spirit of God takes the events of God's deeds in the past (creation, exodus, cross, resurrection) and makes them alive in the present with a foretaste of the future. The Spirit empowers the present with good news from the past and with pregnant hopes for the future.

But how does that happen? It happens in part with the gifts of the Spirit, the *charismata* with which the Spirit empowers the life of each person and enlivens the evangelical, canonical, ecclesial and cosmic contexts of our lives. We are empowered not only for our own inner spiritual life but for that work of the Spirit that meant for Isaiah and Jesus "good news to the poor ... release to the captives ... sight to the blind ... liberty to the oppressed" (Luke 4:18-19).

Again, some Christians have appropriated the word "charismatic" for themselves with their particular gifts of the Spirit. But from New Testament usage, *all* Christians are charismatics, for we all are blessed with various gifts of the Spirit and we need to value each one in mutuality and edification and mission together. We do our Bible study in a pneumatic context.

What does this mean for Sunday worship?

To conclude, let me try to put these five contexts into our worship on Sunday mornings. Are they part of the picture?

Well, any sound planning of worship is going to have to take into account the cosmic context of what is going on in the world around us and in the lives of those who come to worship. The worship itself is an expression of the ecclesial context, the gathering of that community of faith with the multiple aspects of its life. In the worship is the reading of the scriptures and their engagement in the sermon, thus expressing the canonical context. And what

we hope will happen in the worship is that God's good news will touch us individually and corporately, the evangelical context. And then we hope that people will be empowered by the Spirit with gifts to go forth to live the good news, individually and corporately, and so let it impact the cosmic context of the week that lies ahead. Then back again next week.

Every Sunday is a time to be empowered by the Spirit, for the sake of good news, as we engage the Bible, in the community, in order to be faithful servants in God's beloved world.

As to our sermons, I like the story of the sexton who used to greet his pastor after the service in one of three ways. If the sermon was good he would say, "Pastor, today the sheep were fed." If it was a so-so sermon he would say, "Pastor, that was a difficult text." And if it was really lousy he would say, "Well, Pastor, today the hymns were well chosen." Given that my spouse is a musician, I've learned how important it is that the hymns be well chosen.

Thank you all.