

# Session 1: Fears and Loves

Reading assignment to be completed before we meet for Session 1:

- [Read Report Introduction and Preamble \(pp.1-14, Sections I and II\)](#)
- [Read Executive Summary Preamble \(p 1, Section I\)](#)

## Listening Circle Outline

### Welcome

### Check-in

- Name
- How long have you been a part of this congregation?
- What do you value about this congregation?

### Clarifying the Goal of Our Group

For the next few weeks we will gather as a group to share our responses to different sections of the Study Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation–Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (Study Report). The structure of each session is meant to help us listen deeply to the report and to one another while seeking to engage these often-divisive topics in distinctly Christian ways. The purpose of this group is not to make a decision about how our congregation should formally respond to the study committee’s report. In our denomination, the council (made up of the elders, deacons, and minister) is the decision-making body of the church, and the council is to make decisions in ways consistent with our denomination’s Church Order and our congregation’s bylaws.

Instead, our gatherings are designed to help us engage these important topics while “bearing with one another in love.”<sup>1</sup> We expect that engaging these topics as Christians will deepen our faith, clarify how we should live, and give witness to the presence and power of God’s Spirit at work among us. An additional result of these groups is that they may provide important insight or context for the council should it decide to take any action. In other words, we hope that what happens in these groups informs any decision the council might make in the future, but what happens in these groups in no way binds the council to a certain decision.

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:1–6: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

*We are going to participate in a number of listening circles together. The success of the circles depends on all of us. Let's take time to answer the following questions:*

- What do you need from each other so we can be well together, listen well to each other, and participate as fully as possible?
- What are you willing to do to ensure the success of this group?

*We will create a list of group norms and expectations on how we engage with one another that everyone can agree on. As the sessions progress, we can make changes to our norms if necessary.*

*Before we begin, I would like to clarify a couple of ground rules for this circle.*

**First, what others say in the circle stays in the circle.** In order to share what we're really thinking and feeling, we'll need to trust one another. As brothers and sisters in Christ together, we need to be careful with what we say outside this group. Carelessness can harm those who have trusted us with what they've shared. Let us honor the trust we give one another.

(Note: if the group has already addressed confidentiality in the group norms, the facilitator can stress the importance of confidentiality. If the group did not talk about confidentiality as part of the group norms, an understanding of confidentiality can be added.)

**Note that at the end of each session and again in our final session, there will be time for the group to decide what the group wants to say or do moving forward. That will be a natural place to consider whether something shared in the group might be shared more broadly.**

**Second, unless otherwise noted, every time we "go around the circle" we will use a talking piece (or a shared speaker's list if meeting virtually). Only the person with the talking piece is permitted to speak. No interruptions from others or immediate responses will be permitted.**

**Third, if you do not wish to respond to a specific question, you may pass or ask that the facilitator come back to you at the end before asking the next question.**

**Fourth, because the primary purpose of these circles is to listen to each other, please don't take notes. Listen to understand what others are saying. We believe it's critical that people have an opportunity to feel genuinely heard.**

*Are there any questions about the process?*

## **Fears and Loves<sup>2</sup>**

*Many of us have had years to wonder about and study the issues addressed in this report. Yet this may be the first time we'll engage these topics openly with people in our congregation. Because these issues are relevant, personal, and important, it is natural to have some fear about how this process might go and what might happen in our church moving forward.*

*This video from [The Colossian Forum](#) clarifies how our fears often reveal what we love and how naming those fears together as a group can help move us forward. (video link not available in sample)*

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<sup>2</sup> This exercise is adapted from materials from The Colossian Forum.

*We are beginning a study of and conversation about human sexuality. As part of this process, you will be invited to tell others what you really think about the issue. Going around the circle once for each question, each person will have a chance to respond to these questions:*

- 1. What struck you about the video?**
- 2. What are you concerned or anxious about?**
- 3. What do you fear could go wrong?**
- 4. What do you deeply value (the love behind the fear) that you want to protect?**

## **Prayer**

*We've begun to name our fears. But in order to truly share our fears with one another and to address them, we need God's help. We also need help to discover the truly valuable things that are at risk.*

*Invite a member or two from your group to read from 1 John 4:7–21:*

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

*We'll divide our time of prayer into three sections focused on these verses. We'll first remember God's love for us. Then we'll confess that God's love should lead us to love. Then we'll ask God to cast out our fear with God's love. We'll close when I say, "Lord, in your mercy" and you reply, "hear our prayer."*

*I'll introduce each section with a Bible verse and an invitation for people to pray out loud.*

**Let us pray.**

**"This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."**

**Let us thank the Lord for the ways he shows his love for us.**

(Offer time for spoken and silent prayers.)

**"We love because he first loved us."**

**Let us confess the ways we have been afraid and have failed to love.**

(Offer time for spoken and silent prayers.)

**"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear."**

**Let us ask God to drive out our fear with love.**

(Offer time for spoken and silent prayers.)

**Facilitator: Lord, in your mercy,**

**All: hear our prayer.**

## Responding to the Report

*You've each had a chance to read some of the report.*

*Some parts of the report may have confirmed your fears. Other parts may have allayed your fears. Going around the circle, each person will have a chance to respond to these questions:*

- 1. What is one part of the introduction or preamble that resonated with you?**
- 2. What is one part of the introduction or preamble that frustrated you?**
- 3. How does your resonance or frustration relate to what you love or fear?**

## Our Next Session

**During our next session we will listen to the report and each other based on Section III of the report: A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.**

To be sufficiently prepared to participate, we ask each participant to read at least the relevant section of the executive summary each week before we meet. We also strongly encourage you to read the relevant section in the full report, which contains much more context and relevant detail than the summary.

(Add any other pertinent information about gathering for the next session.)

## Check-out

*Going around the circle, each person will have a chance to respond to these questions:*

1. Is there something you heard that surprised you?
2. Is there something you heard that made you wonder?
3. Is there something you heard that made you start to think differently?

## Closing Prayer

## Session 2: A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

Reading assignment to be completed before we meet for Session 2:

- [Read Report, A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality \(pp.15-36, Section III\)](#)
- [Read Executive Summary, A Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality \(pp. 1-3, Section II\)](#)

### Check-In Circle

*Before we start, let's do a quick check-in circle.*

*(Choose one check-in question, such as: What was your favorite part about today? What did you need to do to get here today? What do you hope for from our session today?)*

*Reminder: In each of the upcoming sessions, we will gather as a group to share our responses to a different section of the study report. The structure of each session is meant to help us listen to the report and to one another while seeking to engage these often-divisive topics in distinctly Christian ways. The purpose of this group is not to make a decision about how our congregation should formally respond to the study committee's report.*

*Instead, these gatherings are designed to help us engage these important topics while "bearing with one another in love." We expect that engaging these topics as Christians will deepen our faith, clarify how we should live, and give witness to the presence and power of God's Spirit at work among us. An additional result of these groups is that they may provide important insight or context for the council should they decide to take any action. In other words, while we hope that what happens in these groups informs any decision the council might make in the future, what happens in these groups in no way binds the council to a certain decision.*

### Devotion

Throughout the New Testament letters, Christian discipleship is not assumed to take place *after* conflicts have been fixed, as though conflicts were only a distraction from a Christian's sanctification. Rather, our most beloved instructions for discipleship assume that disciples are relating to those they disagree with in distinctly Christian ways.

In other words, we do not put off our discipleship until these conflicts are resolved. Instead, the way we resolve these conflicts *is part of* our process of sanctification and discipleship. For instance, the virtues commended in Ephesians 4:1-6 only really make sense for communities dealing with some kind of conflict or division:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you

were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In fact, in the latter half of chapter 2, we see a clear example of division in the form of antagonism between Jews and Gentiles. If unity in the church were easy, the Ephesians wouldn't be asked to "make every effort." If Christians all agreed right away, there would be no reason to ask believers to "be patient, bearing with one another in love."

## Group Norms and Expectations

You'll recall that last time as a group we agreed on some group norms and expectations for how we will be together. Let's review them. Is there anything missing? (Add or subtract as the group decides.)

## Understanding the Report

In addition to listening well to one another, one of the goals of this group is to listen well to the report of the Human Sexuality Study Committee. As fallen sinners in a sinful world, we often struggle to listen well to others, especially others with whom we disagree. Instead, we tend to create flimsy caricatures of other people's arguments and criticize those caricatures. But, of course, Jesus calls us to love both our neighbor and our enemy. (Certainly those we disagree with fit into at least one of those groups!)

One expression of Christian love is to listen well. Listening well is a straightforward but difficult part of loving my neighbor as myself. Listening well does not mean you must agree with what someone says. Rather, it means you seek to understand them as well as you'd like them to seek to understand you. This "Understanding" section is designed to help us listen well to the report before we share our response to the report. We'll do that by trying to imagine that the authors of the report are present with us in the circle. Let's try to name their fears and loves as they emerge in the report.

*First, let's go around the circle and share what we think their fears or concerns might be. As always, you may pass or ask the facilitator to return to you. As a reminder, we will use a talking piece (or a shared speaker's list if meeting virtually); only the person with the talking piece may speak. The job of the rest of us is simply to listen.*

1. **What do you think the writers of the report are most concerned about? What do you think they fear could go wrong?**

*Now let's go around the circle and share what value might be behind their fear.*

2. **What do they seem to deeply value—the love behind the fear—that they are trying to protect?**

*Finally, let's go around the circle and share what hope might emerge from this love.*

### 3. What is one thing they seem to hope will go right?

#### Listening and Understanding Circle

*Before we continue, I would like to clarify a couple of ground rules for this circle.*

*First, what is said in the circle stays in the circle. Strict confidentiality is very important. As part of the “Moving Forward” phase of this circle, the group can decide together what (if any) information is OK to share with others.*

*Second, we will use a talking piece (or a shared speaker’s list if meeting virtually). Only the person with the talking piece is permitted to speak. No interruptions from others or immediate responses will be permitted.*

*Third, if you do not wish to respond to a specific question, you may pass or ask that the facilitator come back to you at the end.*

*In the final part of the circle, the “Moving Forward” portion, more informal discussion can take place. Until then we will use the talking piece.*

*Does anyone have any questions about these ground rules?*

*I will now ask the first round of questions. I will ask each person two questions before I go on to the next person.*

#### Round 1

What’s one thought that comes to mind as you think about the report?

Who is affected? In what ways?

#### Round 2

What’s the hardest part for you?

#### Round 3

What are the main issues for us as a congregation?

#### Round 4

What needs to be done to move forward, and what are you prepared to do to move things forward?

*(Write up the suggestions. Clarify the wording for each point. Ensure that you have heard participants correctly. Note to the group that these notes will inform conversation at the final session, when the group will decide on key themes from the sessions that participants would like to communicate with the church council.)*

## Round 5: Praise, Lament and Hope

We'll save a few minutes at the end of each session to return in prayer together before God. Our goal in these groups is to listen well to the report, to listen well to each other, and to engage this difficult topic in such a way that we "bear with one another in love." We'll do that by offering to God our praise, lament, and hope.

*As facilitator, I will take brief notes on what is offered in prayer during this time. These notes will be saved for the group to review in our last session.*

*Let's begin with praise. What happened here that we are thankful to God for? Just speak out loud a word or sentence of praise.*

What happened here that we are thankful to God for?

*Now let's voice our laments.*

What are we sad about? Do we regret something we said or left unsaid? What do we want to be different?

*Finally, we look to the future. The experience of breaking the silence and engaging one another often brings hope. Go ahead and name it.*

Looking to the future, what possibilities do you see? What do we hope for?

*God has been listening, so we don't need to repeat all of these praises, laments, and hopes. We can close by simply saying:*

Facilitator: Lord, in your mercy,

All: hear our prayer.