

## **INCLUSION, THE VINE AND A THIRD WAY**

A common discussion in faith communities today centers on human sexuality and gender identity. The discussion is often between two positions. One calls for full affirmation of the gay community (the “affirming view”) and the other holds the belief that marriage is specifically intended to be between a man and woman (the “traditional view”).

Jesus was often confronted by similar, either/or situations in the Gospels. Rather than entering into a polarizing debate, Jesus commonly rejected the two positions by transcending either option and presenting a Third Way (Mark 12:13-17, John 8:1-11, 9:1-7). After an extended season of prayer, discernment, study and dialogue, the following describes our discerned posture.

At The Vine, we embrace a Third Way where our unity comes from our shared faith in Christ. In short, this means that we do not seek to strictly align with either affirming or traditional positions. We are seeking a Third Way as we pursue love and truth while providing space for individuals to differ on their theological convictions in this matter. At the Vine, we acknowledge these are tough and important topics. Faithful people will come to different conclusions in the interpretation of scripture.

*We choose to value empathy and compassion over certainty and absolute agreement. We seek unity in following Jesus within the essentials of our faith.*

The Third Way honors those who hold an affirming position as we extend radical hospitality to the LGBTQ community and include them into the life of our church. Because we believe that all are created in God’s image, we uphold the uniqueness, dignity and intrinsic value of everyone at The Vine (regardless of age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity). We also seek to honor those from a more traditional view by respecting this theological perspective. We believe this Third Way will create a space where we learn to listen, serve and trust each other.

### **The four pillars on which our position stands:**

#### **1. The Bible is authoritative and inspired by God.**

First and foremost, we uphold the Bible as the perfect, inspired Word of God; with Jesus acting as the authoritative norm for interpretation. Every person is invited into God’s mercy and salvation through the culmination of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Therefore, we seek to make The Vine a safe place for *all* to follow Jesus with the

conviction that this posture is not at the expense of the authority of Scripture. While we acknowledge the different interpretive frameworks that move people toward affirmation and non-affirmation, we hope to find unity by continuing to deepen our understanding of scripture and faithfulness to following Jesus. We want to read Scripture with its historical context in mind, in conversation with tradition and our experience with others, as we continually rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## **2. Human sexuality is not an issue of salvation.**

Beliefs about the definition of marriage and human sexuality are not in the same category as what we confess as foundational Christianity. Though moral beliefs and behaviors are important in our discipleship, they are not essential for salvation. The Third Way opens space for broader dialogue and deeper engagement on these and other moral matters as we seek faithfulness to the way of Jesus.

## **3. Our posture is one of grace and respect.**

Since we view same-sex marriage as a complex issue, we allow for disagreement and dialogue under the unity we find in Christ. We consider it a disputable matter, not because it is unimportant, but because our unity is founded on Jesus rather than agreement on all debatable topics. We hold unity in the essentials and empathy in what is not essential. While we may not all agree, we come to Christ and to Christ's church together in unity.

## **4. We are better equipped when we live in a community of diversity.**

Though the impulse for many is to splinter and separate on this issue, we seek to follow Jesus by learning to live with those with whom we disagree. We believe living into a Third Way better equips followers of Jesus to bear witness to our world in how to live with respect and grace in a diverse community. Rather than gathering into smaller groups of "sameness," we seek to be a community of faith that practices listening and empathy while holding fast to the way of Jesus.

### **Given these pillars, we commit to the following:**

#### **1. We will acknowledge and respect all marriages.**

We will respect every marriage in our church and invite members to do the same. A posture of humility and respect is essential in beginning a relationship and loving one another as Christ does. Pastors and ordained staff are permitted to officiate and participate in weddings as they follow their Spirit-led conscience. The Vine also upholds a belief that sexual intimacy is reserved for the bounds of marriage.

## **2. We support those who choose celibacy.**

Paul writes that our highest calling is to live a life of full devotion to God (Col. 3:1-4). For some, celibacy is an important part of setting his or her heart and mind on the things above, and not on earthly things. We therefore honor and support all gay and heterosexual individuals who discern a calling towards a life of celibacy based on their desire to serve God and honor their understanding of God's Word.

## **3. We do not condemn or exclude participation in the life of the church.**

There will be no difference between how heterosexual and LGBTQ church members are considered regarding qualifications for membership, communion, baptism, or any volunteer or leadership position. All will be held to the same standards of devotion to Christ, spiritual maturity, gifting and conduct established for a position of leadership.

## **4. We want to be known for our grace.**

We have not chosen the path of least resistance but believe a Third Way is a narrow path God has called us to walk. Our intent is not shallow peacekeeping, but a step toward peacemaking as we establish a community built upon empathy, humility and grace. It is not a position where one side of the debate wins. Instead, it is a posture where we commit to trust and respect others and prioritize loving well over being right. Our prayer is that this kind of love will define us, and that there will be no stumbling blocks in our church other than the radical and unconditional love of Jesus Himself (1 Corinthians 1:23).

We believe this Third Way ultimately maintains our invitation for *all* to join us as we follow Jesus together.

*The Vine Leadership Team - Originally recorded October 7, 2020, updated and ratified on April 20, 2022.*