

Rocky Hill Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
“Small Group Bible Study” – sponsored by the Open and Affirming Committee
Session #3 – February 12, 2009 at 7:00 PM

WELCOME

PRAYER

REVIEW Behavioral Covenant (handout)

FIRST READING: Galatians 5:1-15

STEP 1: Read the context bullet-points together.

STEP 2: Read the Bible passage out loud together.

STEP 3: Discuss each of the following questions together:

- What is the author trying to tell us in this passage?
- What does “Freedom in Christ” mean to you?

SECOND READING: Ephesians 5: 21-33

STEP 1: Read the context bullet-points together.

STEP 2: Read the Bible passage out loud together.

STEP 3: Discuss the following questions together:

- What message is the author delivering to his readers?
- How does the modern-day view of marriage compare to this passage?
- The passages in this and following sections include instruction for wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters. To what other relationships might we (or might not we) apply these instructions: Connecticut Same-Sex Marriages? Committed, but unmarried persons? Work situations?

THIRD READING: Matthew 19:3-12

STEP 1: Read the context bullet-points together.

STEP 2: Read the Bible passage out loud together.

STEP 3: Discuss the following questions together:

- What message is the author delivering to his readers?
- When divorce occurs, what hope does Jesus offer?

A Behavioral Covenant for Group Conversations and Forums

Behavioral Covenants* have been very important aids to individuals, institutions and congregations engaged in sensitive discussions. The Open and Affirming Committee encourages use of this covenant during ONA programming.

Covenant

Our purpose is to promote understanding.

We will treat each other with caring and respect, as God's beloved children.

We will take time for prayer.

We will speak in the first person "I", and from our own experience.

We will speak one at a time.

We will listen for understanding, especially when we seem to disagree.

We will speak and seek the truth in love.

We will allow each other equal "air time."

We will ask questions for clarification, not for judgment.

*Source (with modifications): <http://www.ctucc.org/resources/behavioralcovenant-sbs0304.html>

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2/12/2008

Ephesians 5:21-33

From the Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version Bible, 1977:

- The theme of this brief letter is God's eternal purpose in establishing and completing the universal Church of Jesus Christ.
- Supposedly written by Paul from prison, the letter was likely not directed specifically TO the church at Ephesus, but various Pauline materials were collected there and circulated to churches throughout the region.

From The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II, 1953:

- The spirit of mutual subjection is cardinal to the whole Christian conception of social relations.

From The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1, 1994:

- "When v. 21 advises Christians to 'be subject' to one another, no one bats an eye, but when the same verb is addressed to wives with regard to husbands in v. 22, protest erupts. Someone inevitably asks whether the verb has a different meaning. Popular substitutions, such as 'defer to' or 'respect,' fail to capture the point of the verb. It does imply a hierarchy of command, though the obedience offered may be the voluntary submission of mutual Christian love, as in v. 21, rather than military style obedience to the command of a superior officer or government authorities."
- "Insofar as Ephesians employs the conventional wisdom of its time in adapting the household code to Christian use, Christians certainly must consider the social structures and wisdom of their own time in formulating an ethic for marriage. At the same time, we should be conscious of the fairly recent cultural origins of modern family relationships. Merely replacing a patriarchal hierarchy determined by gender with an economic one determined by the size of one's paycheck is no improvement. If authority and responsibility are shared, then consensus and communication are critical virtues. Listening to others is an essential habit."

Galatians 5:1-15

From the Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version Bible, 1977:

- Often called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty, the Letter to the Galatians deals with the question whether a Gentile must become a Jew before he can become a Christian.
- Here are set forth, with impassioned eloquence, the true function of the Mosaic law and its relation to God's grace manifested in Christ. The declaration of the principles reiterated in this letter's six chapters made Christianity a world religion instead of a Jewish sect.

From The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II, 1953:

- To preserve and make right the use of freedom:
 - v. 1: by resisting every proposal to return to slavery
 - vv. 2-6: by recognizing that the law can add nothing to grace
 - vv. 7-12: by preventing interference with runners in the Christian race
 - vv. 13-15: by maintaining the right conception and use of freedom
- v. 3: Jewish Christians who had been circumcised before hearing the gospel of Christ were not debtors to do the whole of the law or any part of it.
- v. 9: In Paul's world, the symbol of yeast was a sinister, not helpful, one.
- v. 13: By Paul's definition a Christian was one who needed no law to make him love his neighbor and refrain from biting and devouring him. But the old competitive drive, which was incompatible with liberty, was always willing to seize the opportunity to reassert itself. In other words, don't use freedom to make low use of material things.
- Those who chose a celibate life are praiseworthy, but are cautioned about spiritual pride.

From The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1, 1994:

- "Paul is the eternal enemy of all efforts to bundle the gospel as part of a package deal that includes additional membership requirements."

Matthew 19:3-12

From the Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version Bible, 1977:

- The Gospel according to Matthew is a manual of Christian teaching in which Jesus Christ, Lord of the new-yet-old community, the church, is described particularly as the fulfiller and fulfillment of God's will disclosed in the Old Testament. Jesus is set forth as Israel's Messiah in whom God's purpose culminates and by whose words and life his followers, the true Israel, may gain divine forgiveness and fellowship.
- This Gospel is anonymous. The unknown Christian teacher who prepared it during the last third of the first century may have used as one of his sources a collection of Jesus' sayings that the apostle Matthew is said to have made. In time a title containing Matthew's name, and signifying apostolic authority, came to identify the whole.

From The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II, 1953:

- Matthew's audience would have known that the rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai heatedly debated the legal grounds for divorce. Jesus is being pushed to take a side, but takes a higher perspective and says marriage was instituted by God at Creation for creation.
- Jesus emphasizes the permanence of marriage. God's purpose is a stable family life, and divorce is no part of that purpose.
- All the groups/positions in the divorce debate assumed dominance of the male
- v. 9: "The exception 'except for unchastity' was probably not part of Jesus' own utterance."
- Those who chose a celibate life are praiseworthy, but are cautioned about spiritual pride.

From The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1, 1994:

- "The most difficult thing for modern Western Christians to understand about this whole section... is not the individual teachings, but that such matters are more than individual concerns to be decided by each person. Matthew's perspective calls for Christians to understand themselves belonging to a community, so that no decision is purely personal and individual."