

The Bible and Same-Sex Marriage: An Overview from Ridley College

We acknowledge that homosexuality is a difficult topic to discuss. This is not because the Bible's teaching on marriage and sexuality is especially unclear, but because its implications are so deeply personal. We are Bible scholars, but we are also people. All of us have wrestled with God's teaching on marriage on a personal level as it relates to those we love – our children, our friends, those we pastor – and indeed to our own lives.

Coming together as a church to discuss this topic can be difficult and even painful, but it is important. Anglicans around the world are now being asked to decide whether to revise our standards of worship and doctrine to accommodate rapidly changing cultural attitudes to homosexuality in western countries. Our Constitution and the Thirty-Nine Articles give the power and responsibility to us as a national church to change our traditions and ceremonies in light of changing times, with only a single restriction: that *nothing may be done that is contrary to the word of God* (Article XXXIV). We must begin our conversation by seriously and humbly wrestling with Scripture, asking what the Bible teaches about God's intention for our sexuality.

Our purpose in writing this brief letter is to support our fellow Anglicans in wrestling with this issue by offering a summary of the scholarly discussion over what the Bible teaches on homosexuality, and an explanation for why we believe the traditional path on marriage and sexuality is the one that Christ is calling us to take.

As Christians have engaged with the Bible's teaching on homosexuality, they have tended to take three main paths:

A. Traditional path

This view says that the Bible teaches that sex is designed for marriage between a man and a woman, and that we should do what the Bible says.

Under the traditional view, sex is intended as part of God's vision of lifelong marriage between one man and one woman. This foundational doctrine is expressed most memorably in Genesis 2, which celebrates the archetypal account of the first marriage, between Adam and Eve. Sex is designed for marriage, because one of the things marriage is designed for is to enable humans to fulfil their task and blessing of filling and ruling the earth by growing families.¹ Marriage is not something humans invented; it has a particular purpose within the creator's design for human relationships.

¹ Our first order Service for Marriage helpfully names three biblical purposes for marriage: 1) as a symbol of the union between Christ and his church, 2) for companionship, faithfulness and strength, and 3) to establish families within which children can be born and nurtured.

God's people are consistently called to honour the creator's design by avoiding those sexual practices of other cultures that fall outside this purpose for marriage. Leviticus 18, for instance, tells Israelites and resident foreigners alike to avoid any sexual activity outside God's original design. Verse 22 gives the example of sex between two people of the same gender: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman." This is not an arbitrary new rule just for Israel, but an expression of the design established in the beginning.

This design for marriage is assumed by the New Testament. When Jesus is asked about a contemporary issue of marriage and sex, he answers based on the design principles established in Genesis (Mark 10:6–9). When Jesus uses the general term "sexual immorality" in Matthew 15:19 this includes any sexual activity that is outside the creator's design and hence unlawful for God's people under the Jewish Torah. When Paul wants to give examples of sexual practices that fall outside this design, he explicitly refers back to the examples in Leviticus (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

While consensual homosexual sex between adults was known and even celebrated in Greek and Roman culture, God's people were called to be unashamedly different. The Old and New Testaments assume that sex between two people of the same gender is outside God's intention and plan for marriage.

At the same time, the Bible does not condemn anyone for being attracted to the same sex, or for having a sexual orientation towards the same sex. Whether we are exclusively attracted to people of the same sex, or the opposite sex, the call for any follower of Jesus is the same: to honour and worship God with our body, to resist temptation as Jesus did (Hebrews 4:15), to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18), and to claim our situation as an opportunity to celebrate the kingdom to come. Christ does not call us to heterosexuality but to holiness.²

B. Revisionist path

This view says we should do what the Bible says, but it turns out the Bible is actually positive, or at least neutral, about homosexual sex. We've been reading it wrong all along.

This is a relatively new path, which has been around since 1980 when John Boswell published *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Boswell and his followers raise doubts about the traditional interpretation of a number of passages in the New Testament. In particular, they focus on the standard translations of two key Greek words (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) which appear next to each other in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and are often translated separately as "male prostitutes, sodomites" (NRSV) or together as "men who have sex with men" (ESV). *Malakoi* means "soft" and is traditionally understood in this context to refer to the passive or penetrated male partners in a homosexual act. *Arsenokoitai* is a new word which doesn't appear in any of the literature we have before Paul. Paul may have coined the term. It is made by putting two words together – man (*arsen*) and bed (*koite*) – to make the word "man-bedders": men who take other men to bed for sex.

Those on the revisionist path argue that the meanings of these words are in fact unclear and that the New Testament may be urging us to avoid only one particular *type* of homosexual

² For a sympathetic and thoughtful presentation of the traditional path see Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

sexual activity rather than homosexual sex in general. The suggestions for what that type of sex might be vary depending on whom you ask, but some theories are:

1. exploitative relationships, such as sex between men and boys, or
2. sex in the context of pagan temple prostitution, or
3. homosexual sex between people who are really heterosexual (and so going against their nature), or
4. anal sex without a condom.

A slightly broader argument is that first-century Jews like Paul had no concept or experience of homosexual orientation, or of consensual same-sex relationships, and so what they were condemning was something very different to the modern, exclusive, lesbian couple or gay couple.

This path has much to commend it. Those who are on it are genuinely seeking to understand what the Bible says and to put it into practice. Good scholarship has indeed shown that some of our traditional assumptions need revision: for example, translators were almost certainly wrong to use the traditional words “sodomites” (NRSV) or “effeminate” (KJV). When we apply a text to our own situation, we need to be aware of the gap between our own context and the situation being spoken into.

The problem with this revisionist position, however, is that the best scholarship on the historical and linguistic background for these texts still points to a basic meaning of men who practise homosexual sex.³ Furthermore, when we move from narrow linguistic questions to consider Christianity’s theological and ethical vision of human relationships, only two ways of expressing our sexuality are celebrated. The first is faithful lifelong marriage between a man and a woman which embodies the creation mandate to fill the earth. The second is chaste singleness within a community of deep love which embodies the kingdom to come, where marriage will be replaced with a new kind of intimacy. The revisionist path has an uphill battle to find space for other types of sexual activity within these two biblical visions of human relationships.

C. Progressive path

This view says the Bible teaches that God’s purpose for sex is heterosexual marriage, but the Bible is wrong and needs updating.

Those on the progressive path agree with those on the traditional path about *what* the Bible says. This view recognises that Jesus and Paul almost certainly assumed that homosexuality was contrary to God’s design for marriage – of course they did, they were first-century Jews! To the first Christians, who were all Jewish, homosexuality represented the parts of Greek and Roman culture that were most foreign to Israel’s distinctive ethics. This view, which is emerging as the consensus amongst secular scholars of ancient sexuality, sees the revisionist path as wishful thinking with little historical merit.⁴

³ See, for example: William Loader, “Reading Romans 1 on Homosexuality in Light of the Biblical/Jewish and Greco-Roman Perspectives of its Time”, *ZNW* 108.1 (2017): 119–149; Roy Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 241–242.

⁴ For a leading example see William Loader’s exhaustive study *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

However, these progressive voices depart from the traditional path on *whether the Bible is right*. They suggest that the Bible contains errors in its doctrine and morality at points, and so we can and should resist or even improve on those parts of it that do not sit comfortably with our modern values. The church wrote the Bible, and we can rewrite the Bible.

We admire those who hold this view for their honesty, and we agree with them about what the Bible says. However, we do not agree that we should privilege our own cultural views on the purpose of sexuality over the theology of creation and marriage which is consistently developed from Genesis to Jesus and has been championed by Christians everywhere throughout history. We hold grave concerns about rewriting those parts of Holy Scripture we find challenging. Walking away from Scripture as the authoritative word of God does not lead us closer to God.

Conclusion

We are convinced that the biblical vision for human sexuality is clear. We also believe that it is beautiful, and that God's commands are for our good as well as for his glory. The traditional path may be a hard one to travel, but it is the one we are called to take.

We rejoice with the many gay, lesbian and same-sex attracted men and women in our churches who love Jesus and are quietly committed to following him on this path, trusting him with their whole lives – even, and perhaps especially, with their sex lives. The church as a whole can learn much from their example about what following Jesus looks like as we await his return. Jesus calls us to give up our lives, take up our cross, and follow him no matter the cost. If, for some of us, life has become a little too comfortable, a little too much like the world, incurring too little a cost, then we might look to these celibate gay, lesbian and same-sex attracted saints whose lives can serve as a living, breathing sermon, an example to follow, and a reminder not only of the cost of following Jesus but also that he is worth giving up anything to follow.

“there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:29)

REV DR TIM FOSTER
ACTING PRINCIPAL
RIDLEY COLLEGE

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