

Same-sex marriage: biblical considerations

Marriage: Jesus and Genesis

1. It is often noted, correctly, that no recorded saying of Jesus deals with same-sex relationships. It is sometimes argued, less convincingly, that Jesus' silence implies a benign or permissive attitude on his part towards sexual relationships between people of the same sex. The opposite is more likely to be the case.
2. Jesus lived his entire earthly life immersed in the culture of Galilee and Judaea, and he engaged with the controversies of that culture. On a number of occasions he addressed issues debated within his culture and often proposed controversial positions to his followers: on divorce, for example, or Sabbath keeping, or table fellowship with 'sinners'.
3. Yet for all his willingness to question tradition, Jesus is not recorded as questioning Jewish tradition on same-sex partnerships. Jesus' Jewish forebears and contemporaries without exception believed that same-sex sexual activity was contrary to God's revealed will. This was the working assumption of Judaism in Jesus' day. If Jesus engaged in controversy on so many other fronts, yet said nothing on this – or nothing which any of his followers thought worth recording – then the most obvious conclusion is that he did not take issue with his contemporaries about it.
4. The argument is sometimes made that Jesus preached a gospel of radical inclusiveness, and that his actions broke down taboos of ritual cleanness (he reached out to lepers), of gender (women were among his followers) and even of conventional concepts of 'sin' (table-fellowship with tax-collectors). By extension, we are called to continue in our day the message of radical inclusiveness by actions which welcome the outcast and outsider without seeking to change them. The categories of outcast and outsider for us today must include the gay, the lesbian, the transsexual and the bisexual person.
5. This kind of interpretation has its roots in scholarship such as that of William Countryman on the sources of sexual ethics in the Bible, that of E.P.Sanders, questioning whether Jesus in fact called for repentance at all but simply offered table fellowship without barriers, and that of Marcus Borg and the Jesus Seminar on Jesus as an open-minded teacher of wisdom.
6. But the interpretation of Countryman, Sanders, Borg and others in this vein is vulnerable to the acute observation which the Roman Catholic scholar George Tyrrell made on the Liberal Protestantism exemplified by Adolf von Harnack a century ago:

“The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well”.¹

1 Tyrrell, G. 1913 *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* London, Longmans Green & Co. p.44

7. We should always be suspicious of our method when it leads us to discover a Jesus congenial to ourselves who espoused values remarkably like our own.
8. And in fact Jesus was not entirely silent on issues of sexuality. Particularly significant is Jesus' response when challenged to take a stand among the competing points of view on divorce within Judaism.

Matthew 19:3-9: And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" ⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." ⁷ They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" ⁸He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (Parallel: Mark 10.2-12)

9. This passage notoriously bristles with problems of interpretation. But for our purposes we may note a few aspects of this divorce saying.
10. It gives us in the first place an insight into Jesus' ethic of love. Jesus' understanding was that love means aligning oneself with the interests of the Kingdom of God and expressing towards others the same Kingdom-of-God love. Love, for Jesus, certainly did not mean giving ourselves everything we might find ourselves desiring.
11. Secondly this divorce saying underlines Jesus' view, which he articulated elsewhere (Matt 5.27-8), that sex is to be confined to two persons of the opposite sex within marriage.
12. Thirdly, his reason for that restriction is based on the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2. Indeed, he brings together Gen1.27 and 2.24 as the foundation and starting-point for his teaching on marriage and divorce. The two differentiated sexes are the absolute prerequisite for sexual activity and for marriage. This is why there are two partners in marriage: not because of the quality or intensity of love between two people, but in view of the male-female bond established at creation.
13. In Genesis 2 the profound need of the man for a 'helper fit for him' (Gen 2.20) is not met by any existing creature. Nor is it met by the creation of a parallel and similar creature. Rather it is met, and only met, by the creation of another being which shares his nature by being drawn from him, but which is also differentiated from him (Gen 2.23). The union of the two differentiated sexes is a *re-union* of these two parts of the human race which at a deep level belong together and which in consequence complement one another physically and also personally. All the potential for human fruitfulness is contained in precisely this differentiation (Gen 2.24). Jesus' affirmation of the two becoming one flesh in marriage

shows his insistence that the structural requirement of male and female partners is as necessary as the structural requirement of only two participants. If male-male or female-female partners in this bond could do equally well, then Gen 2 would have to be a very different story from the story it is.

14. Genesis 1 and 2 provided Jesus' starting-point in his explanation of sexual ethics and marriage. From that basis he critiqued divorce – certainly a form of divorce which was essentially a serial polygamy. On that basis also all other potential forms of sexual union are eliminated: whether temporary sexual unions of male and female which ignore the permanence of one flesh; or multiple unions which dispense with the exclusive two-fold nature of the creation order for humanity; or same-sex unions which disregard the essential re-union which is built into the male-female bond. Neither Jesus' example nor his teaching opens a door to same-sex marriage.

Paul: what did he know?

15. While Jesus said nothing directly about same-sex relationships, Paul very clearly does so in several passages: Rom 1.18-27, 1 Cor 6.9-11 & 1 Tim 1.8-11 (though the authorship of 1 Tim is contested). All the references in the Pauline letters make clear that same-sex erotic activity is contrary to God's will.
16. However, scholars have been busy with these passages for more than half a century, to try to establish that the conventional understanding of these texts is mistaken. Or, more simply, that Paul was mistaken. In general the main revisionist approach is to argue that Paul is not really writing about homosexuality because he did not know about homosexuality.
17. The study of sexuality in the ancient world has grown enormously recently, and has steered interpretation of Paul in new directions. A strong trend of interpretation now holds that in Gentile society of the New Testament era there was no moral taboo against male same-sex intercourse. The main problem was social: the passive partner was dishonoured by the act. The active partner was not. Further, in their world of thought there was no concept corresponding to our notion of 'orientation'. Men and women might be attracted to, and find satisfaction with, partners of either sex. Gentiles of the first century took an act-based view of sexual activity. They had little insight into psychology, and so saw only what people *did*, not (as we do) what they *are*.
18. If we accept such an understanding of ancient sexuality, then we could say that Paul was ill-equipped to make sense of the sexual culture which surrounded him. As a Jew living in a largely Gentile culture, he could see only uncleanness (the legacy of the Levitical laws in his mental framework) and a kind of sexual chaos. Paul said to the Galatians that the only thing that matters is 'faith working through love' (Gal 5.6) but his preconceptions, so it might be said, prevented him from seeing love where it was present in committed same-sex relationships. Paul said that both female and male same-sex relations were contrary to nature (Rom 1.26-7) because he did not know, as people today think they know, that attraction to

people of the same sex is the nature of some people. He could not understand the activity of people around him, but we can. This more recent view claims to appreciate both the Gentile culture of Paul's day and our own sexual nature in a way that he could not. Paul was not speaking about homosexuality, because he did not know that there was such a thing as homosexuality.

19. So, at least, the revised view of Paul maintains. But was Paul necessarily entirely ignorant of something corresponding to our notion of 'orientation'? He certainly would not have approached this issue with the interpretative tools of modern psychology. But recent scholarship has made clear that Paul's contemporaries had several theories about the origin of same-sex attraction. Some of these theories looked very like our contemporary understanding of a deep, unchosen preference for sexual relationships with one's own sex. In his major collection of source texts, Thomas K. Hubbard summarises the understanding of same-sex attraction in the early imperial age of Rome, which was also the New Testament period,

"Homosexuality in this era may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation."²

20. After reviewing different theories of sexual desire in antiquity, Robert Gagnon concludes:

"At the very least it is likely that Paul (like Philo who made explicit reference to the creation myth propounded by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*) was familiar with one or more of these theories. Moreover, he could not have been unaware of the existence of men whose sexual desire was oriented exclusively toward other males (the *kinadoi* [the passive male partners in a male homosexual union], for example)."³

21. But doesn't Paul seem to suggest in Romans that he is thinking of people who are by orientation heterosexual, yet who have 'exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature' (in the case of women, Rom 1.26) or who 'gave up natural relations with women' (in the case of men, Rom 1.27)? In other words, isn't he describing the biography of individuals who have 'contrary to [their own] nature' (Rom 1.26) moved into a same-sex mode?

22. The answer to those questions is 'no'. Paul takes same-sex erotic activity as a parallel to, and an obvious outworking of, the idolatry he has described in Rom 1.21-5. The truth about God should be evident from creation (Rom 1.19-20). When he says that humans

²Hubbard, T.K. 2003 *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*. Berkeley & Los Angeles/London: University of California Press p. 386.

³ Gagnon, R.A.J. 2001 *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press p.385.

have exchanged God's glory for idols, and exchanged God's truth for a lie, he is not speaking of individuals' biographies, but is plotting the course of human culture as a whole. Once human beings ignore the revelation of God through creation in order to project their own desires onto idols which they have created, then the way is clear for the next stage: to exchange the gift from God of the male-female bond for an alternative self-made sexual bond. The union of man and woman corresponds to the truth about God, revealed, given to us, and to which we should conform. The union of man and man, or woman and woman, corresponds to idolatry, self-created, originating with ourselves, and seeking to conform our God-given nature to our autonomous will, to our self-defined identity. Such is the structure of Paul's argument.

23. So it would be no surprise for him if we were to tell Paul that there are people who experience attraction to people of the same sex as something deeply integral to themselves. His observation of Gentile society would probably have shown him examples. His awareness of the thought of his contemporaries would likewise have given him reason to believe in same-sex attraction as "an essential and central category of personal identity" (Hubbard). His analysis of human rebellion against God would lead him to expect precisely this. Idolatry and all its consequences, sexual and otherwise, which he deals with in Rom 1.26-32, go very deep.

24. It would also be meaningless, in Paul's view, to say that same-sex erotic activity is morally transformed if it is placed in the context of a permanent, faithful and stable relationship. The ethical problem with sex between men or between women is not that it is fleeting, faithless and unstable, but that it contradicts God's will for humanity. The case of incest in Corinth (1 Cor 5.1-5) would not have been morally improved by being made permanent. Paul saw the same *structural* problem at the base of incest, temporary sexual unions with prostitutes (1 Cor 6.15-16), and same-sex unions. None could be ameliorated by changing their context because each defies the God-given mandate that sex is to be the preserve of the permanent union of man and woman.

25. Louis Crompton, whose stance is favourable to same-sex relationships, has seen this more clearly than many Christian commentators:

"According to [one] interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at 'bona fide' homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian."⁴

4 Crompton, L. 2003 *Homosexuality and Civilization*. Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press. p. 114.

Scripture, the church and same-sex marriage

26. A great deal of effort has been expended in the past couple of generations in trying to make scripture say what it manifestly does not: that same-sex erotic relationships can in good circumstances enjoy God's blessing. A more honest exegesis has to conclude that we do not have a mandate from scripture to bless such unions, still less to extend a form of marriage to them. Quite the reverse.
27. Some see the same-sex marriage debate as essentially an ethical disagreement like pacifism, stem-cell research, or vegetarianism: a generator of passionate argument, but scarcely an issue to split the church. But it is not essentially an ethical disagreement. It is a disagreement about the status of scripture. Beneath that, it raises the question of whether we have any revelation of God's will, or if new thought can in the end relativise and call into question any and all inherited beliefs.