

# Homosexuality: What does God think? How can we respond?

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## Before we start...

I am white, male and heterosexual – and arguably therefore have experienced far less hurt, misunderstanding and rejection than many others. However, as a Bible teacher, I cannot neglect this important subject – which, for many, stands as the ‘elephant in the room’ that many evangelicals simply remain silent about for fear of causing controversy or being attacked by one side or the other. Discussion of homosexuality raises big questions, strong views and risks offence on all sides. So, we must tackle it with fairness, grace and compassion, remembering that for many people this is more than interesting theory - it really matters, for some because they experience same-sex attraction, for others because their whole biblical worldview seems under threat.

*“The crisis over homosexuality in the church is a test case over the Bible itself, and how we can make it speak in a modern world that is often hostile to its most explicit statements on a subject.” – Mark Bonnington*

## Why the controversy?

For thousands of years, the united testimony of Christian and Jewish interpreters of Scripture was that homosexual practice was against God's design and not good for humanity. However, in the last few decades, prompted by sweeping attitude changes in society (in the West at least) some in the church have changed their view on this. At first it was mainly more ‘liberal’ theologians, but recently several prominent evangelical leaders have followed suit. Sharp disputes have erupted over how to interpret the relevant Bible passages and what that means for the rest of our theology and faith, our evangelism and pastoral issues.

Hopefully, by now (and remembering our very first TLS session), we are confident that we can tackle big questions without endangering our faith in Jesus and belief in the transforming power of his gospel. However, for many, a change in view would call into question their trust in the Bible, contradicting years of Bible instruction they have received. Would they simply be ‘caving in’ to the world's pressure and going against God's instructions, to the harm of all? Or is God using culture change to jolt the church to learn new things about God and the Bible that we need to embrace for the sake of justice? For many, the stakes feel very high.

## Culture wars... with real casualties

The last few decades has seen unprecedented struggle between two viewpoints in society, a 'cultural war', often with a strong desire to 'punish' those who disagree. The cry on one side has been 'stop the injustice', whilst the cry on the other has been 'stop the immorality'! Gay people have frequently been ostracised and rejected by Christian communities, denounced by preachers and theologians, treated as sub-human and as though their sin was much worse than anyone else's. On the other hand, good-hearted but traditionally-minded Christians are often labelled bigots, ignorant, unloving and backward. This has caused a lot of hurt and confusion, with many same-sex attracted Christians keeping their orientation secret for fear of rejection, and many who hold the historic view (including some of the same-sex attracted ones) keeping quiet for fear of the consequences of voicing it. We would all do well to follow the example of Jesus in our attitudes to one another!

## Some basic assumptions

There is not time in this session for a full discussion of human sexuality, but we will make the assumption (on good biblical, as well as practical and sociological grounds) that God created sex as a good thing and that the proper context for sexual activity is within a faithful, lifelong monogamous marriage covenant. The basic question we are facing, then, is whether such a marriage could be between two people of the same sex or whether marriage is always between a man and a woman.

We will also make the (well-founded) assumption that someone's sexual orientation is not simply a personal or lifestyle choice. The causes of same-sex attraction are not clearly understood. They may involve 'nurture' to some degree, as well as genetic<sup>1</sup> and other factors, however for most people it is involuntary – just something they gradually realise about themselves after they reach puberty. Orientation should therefore always be distinguished from practice and intent.

We will use the expression 'same-sex attracted', rather than 'gay' because not all Christians who experience attraction to members of the same sex self-identify as gay – because of assumptions about lifestyle and their preferences that others (inside and outside the church) would often then subsequently place on them.

## Discussion time...

In tackling this, what is your uppermost concern: fidelity to Scripture, compassion, justice, truth, society, family or something else? Why?

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<sup>1</sup> A so-called 'gay gene' has never been found, but genetics can affect many areas.

## Part 2: Seeking a way forward

First let's look at the relevant Scriptures. They are: Lev 18:22, 20:13, Rom 1:24-27, 1 Cor 6:9-10, 1 Tim 1:9-11. In the past, most people were satisfied with these as proof texts. However, in the last 20-30 years, evangelicals (re-)discovered the art of hermeneutics which demands we go beyond proof texts to determine what God is really saying to us today. We need to take into account the author's intention, what the original hearers understood, cultural setting, original meaning of words, and especially the overall message of Scripture with its unfolding story of God's love for humanity. This is always an incomplete and ongoing process but, having done this myself, whilst I agree with many Christians that we must find new ways of including, loving and valuing our same-sex attracted brothers and sisters, I cannot at this stage, hand-on-heart, teach that the Bible encourages or even allows same-sex 'marriage' or sexual activity.

Why is this? Let's look at some of the arguments used to support same-sex couple relationships and how they relate to our hermeneutical principles.

### Christians are not subject to Old Testament Laws

This is certainly true – we are not under law but under grace (Rom 6:14f). However, some parts of the ancient law code are still relevant to us today. How do we know which parts? The ones that New Testament writers pick up and reaffirm, and that chime with the expanded revelation of God in Christ, can safely be seen to still apply (although the penalties for breaking them no longer do, thankfully!) Both Paul and Jesus drew on portions of the OT Law. Whenever NT writers used the term 'sexual immorality' they would have had in mind the lists of excluded behaviour in Leviticus. Idol worship and sex outside marriage (with marriage as male+female) were consistently warned against. Avoiding these (difficult! – as the pagan world was full of both) was a sign of a transformed life in Christ.

### Paul was thinking of coercive sex, wasn't he?

Some have argued that the type of homosexual activity outlawed in the NT was the abusive and controlling kind. However, the passages above do not support this. Both partners are warned (1 Cor) and it seems both are equally desirous (Rom 1). Coercion is obviously wrong, but there is no real hint of it in the NT passages. In Lev 20, both parties are held guilty, whereas in cases of rape only the man was to be put to death (Deu 22:25).

### Was it just heterosexuals behaving against their 'nature'?

The passage in Romans has been used to suggest that Paul was condemning heterosexual people going against their sexuality and that

he wouldn't have had a problem with authentic homosexual unions. But if Paul meant this he could simply have said it. There is no hint of this anywhere in his letters. Actually, Paul here is not addressing specific groups or types of people but the whole human race. Romans 1 is a sweeping but careful reflection on Genesis 1-3. Male and female were created to worship God and reflect his image, part of which was to multiply. But – contrary to God's intention for nature – they turned in on themselves and worshipped created things and one another. Paul uses homosexual activity as a working example of the loss of humanness that occurred as people lost sight of God. He is not saying that same-sex attracted people are worse idolaters than anyone else, but that the distortion of God's image (nature) in the Fall has produced relationships that cannot by nature result in multiplication or reflect God's original male plus female design. (Interestingly, later in the letter, Sarah and Abraham become fruitful by responding to God in faith.) So this passage is not singling out certain heterosexual groups but the self-destruction of humanity in their failure to worship and image God.

Paul's use of the word 'nature' has been compared with that in 1 Cor 11:14 on head-covering, where nature means 'culture' and can therefore denote something changeable and specific to that era. The argument goes that what is 'natural' in our day is different to when Paul wrote Romans. However, the above understanding of Paul's grand narrative goes against this.

### **Surely it was all about specific Roman/Greek practices?**

It was very common in the Greco-Roman world for young men to sell themselves as long term male 'mistresses' to rich older men, who often also had wives and even female mistresses as well. Some suggest that it was specifically this practice that Paul was addressing. However, there was a perfectly good and well-known word for this practice, but Paul doesn't use it. Instead he uses two, more general, words in 1 Cor 6 which most likely refer to the passive and active partners in male intercourse.

### **Paul just didn't know about faithful lifelong gay relationships?**

Many people assume that the lifestyle options available in NT days did not include faithful monogamous same-sex relationships and that, therefore, the Bible's teaching is culturally conditioned. Certainly, where there was broadly only one option in society (as with slavery, or the position of women in the household) it is more likely that we need to make adjustments for this in our interpretation and practice. However, this was not the case with homosexual relationships. Paul would have been very aware of many different options.

*"There is a popular belief just now that the ancients didn't know about lifelong same-sex relationships, but this is easily refuted by the evidence both literary and archaeological." – N.T. Wright*

We cannot therefore use the same arguments here as we might with the issues of slavery or female leaders to make a case for cultural relativity. It should be noted that in the cases of slavery and women the Bible is not unequivocal – there are Scriptures that speak on both sides of the argument, which need balancing in the light of the whole. In each case, a trajectory towards change can be identified. However, there are no balancing Scriptures in the case of homosexual acts, and no trajectory towards acceptance is seen.

### Isn't this a 'disputable matter' not to be argued over?

Paul argues in 1 Cor 8-10 and Rom 14 in favour of tolerating those with different views on 'disputable matters'. Some are arguing today that the issue of same-sex marriage is a disputable matter that we should 'agree to differ' on and not make a fuss about. However, something does not become disputable in biblical terms just because many people are disputing it(!) but because the Bible specifically labels it as such. In Rom 14, Paul is actually discussing things that could divide Jew and Gentile believers. Key Jewish markers were the food laws and the Sabbath. Jewish believers with strict scruples about food were more likely to avoid food they considered 'unclean' due to its connection with idol worship and so avoid meat altogether. Gentiles may well have found it easier to not worry. Gentiles did not have the Sabbath. Many Jews still observed it. Paul was gently admonishing the Roman church not to set up ethnic divides in the Christian community. He did not see these practices as harmful but optional according to conscience. However, on many other subjects, especially sexual ethics, he allows no such latitude. The issues on which he urges tolerance are those which divide the church along ethnic lines. The issues he does *not* tolerate are those that divide renewed image-bearing humanity from the opposite. For Paul, homosexual acts were not a disputable matter. There was always, however, the possibility for people who had engaged in them to be redeemed and fully integrated into God's people – as many in Corinth had been (1 Cor 6:11).

### The big picture – Scripture as a whole

The Bible tells the story of how God is achieving his original intention, as represented in the garden of Eden. Humanity is to reflect God, especially in their relationships. Genesis sets out many themes, including that of creative difference brought into productive union. Heaven and earth,

day and night, sea and land, male and female are presented as complementary pairs that exist in creative tension. When God says, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him,' (Gen 2:18) the word 'suitable' implies *similar but different*. If all Adam needed was another human being (of either sex) then a different word would have been used, i.e. someone *like* him. As the Bible story progresses, God's relationship with his people is repeatedly portrayed as a marriage, and their unfaithfulness as adultery. In the New Testament, Jesus' relationship with his church is described as that of a bridegroom and his bride, the consummation being the return of Christ at the end of the age. Marriage is seen as a visual aid to foreshadow and explain this relationship, the (at least potential) birth of children highlighting the fruitfulness of this complementary union. Same-sex relationships cannot express this 'union of otherness' that is an extension of the mystery that is the incarnation. In the book of Revelation, the symbol of the new creation, the uniting of heaven and earth, is a marriage. Marriage is therefore not simply a social or sexual arrangement but a prophetic act that requires a man and a woman in covenant together. That is why the Bible starts and finishes with a wedding!

What about the overriding principle of love that supersedes law? Surely, as long as people love one another and are doing no harm they should be allowed to marry whom they wish? This is often used as a clinching argument, where the 'royal law' of love negates all specific commands in the Bible. The problem here is that the same argument could be used to justify so-called 'open marriages', marriages between same-sex siblings or marriages including more than two people (which some people are asking for). Why are these undesirable? As with same-sex marriage in general, they do not reflect the design of the creator in fruit-bearing union of otherness and the creative tension of working out difference and producing something new in the context of covenant.

### Is it compassionate to 'refuse' gay people sex?

Surely it is unfair to deny a life-long sexual relationship to same-sex attracted people? Most Christians who change their view on homosexuality do so because of this perceived injustice, rather than a new theological understanding. What could help is to recognise several often neglected points. (1) Celibacy is not evil, rather it is celebrated as a gift in the Bible (1 Cor 7) allowing greater commitment to Christ. Marriage should not be the aim for all, and does bring its problems. (2) Whilst celibacy involves suffering, suffering is not something to be avoided at all costs. Self-fulfilment is not the goal of the kingdom, but kingdom advances through suffering. (3) Intimacy is not sex. True intimacy is possible in non-sexual relationships. Modern society has relegated intimacy to the sexual act and undervalues friendship. (4)

There will be no marriage in the new age, rather *all* relationships will experience the intimacy and joy that sex is only a foreshadowing of, so people who are celibate, by choice or otherwise, will not miss out in the long term. The sex drive (even if never acted upon) serves to remind us of the passion and desire for closeness that exists between Christ and his people, which will be consummated fully in the age to come.

### So, how should the church respond?

Churches that would be ready to welcome an unmarried heterosexual couple without immediately questioning or challenging their relationship often react differently to a same-sex couple. This should not be the case. We must adopt an inclusive, welcoming attitude, trusting that in the forging of relationships and the discipling process that God will reveal his will and begin change. This change may well *not* include a change in orientation, and we should not pressurise anyone in this. Much abuse has occurred in this area, which does not reflect the Christ who happily ate with social outcasts and so-called 'sinners'.

In the case of same-sex couples with children, should we attempt to break up the family and potentially deprive the children of security? In NT times (as in some parts of the world today), some men had multiple wives. This runs against the biblical ideal, but it seems the NT churches did not require separation which would result in destitution for the separated wives and children. Instead, they required the husbands to take responsibility for the family, but such men were barred from eldership, so that the example of leadership was exclusive monogamous marriage (or singlehood as for Paul). A similar approach could potentially be taken in the case of same-sex couple families.

Where people choose to remain celibate they should be supported. The church must really be a family, a place where true intimacy can grow. People who are single (for *any* reason) should be included in church life at all levels and welcomed freely into family homes.

### Final thoughts – more thinking (and grace) required

The above represents my personal current thinking, which will no doubt continue to evolve with further reflection and discussion with others. In all of this, there is a great need for humility, grace and compassion, with a genuine desire to *hear* those who think differently and especially those who experience same-sex attraction.

Whilst emotion can be a useful prompt to look at an area again, our feelings cannot be the final arbiter – rather the Word of God revealed in Scripture should be the plumb-line. We do, however, need to remain flexible and willing to learn where new scholarship or revelation presents itself. God continues to unfold life-giving truth from his Word all the time!