

Gay Marriage and the Bible

Ernie Thompson

1. What is God's intent for us?

The Creation Story – Partners, Families and Marriage

Genesis 2:18-24

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” ...

²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

²³Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

a) Partners – “*It is not good for the man to be alone*” reminds us that we are created for relationships, with God and with each other. The “suitable partner” for a gay person is someone of the same gender.

b) One Flesh = Family - The same language is later used by Laban to speak of his nephew Jacob: “*Laban said to him, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh!”*” (Gen. 29:13-14) Adam’s exclamation, “*This at last is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh*” and the following observation that “*the two shall become one flesh*” is not about anatomy but about kinship, creating a family.

c) Purpose of Marriage – Not just children, but also self-giving and self-sacrificial love. See Ephesians 5:25-30, “*Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loves the church, giving himself up for her ... For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.*” Gay couples are capable of self-giving, self-sacrificial love which reflects Christ’s love for the church.

d) Celibacy is a Gift – Scripture is clear that celibacy is a special calling and a gift, and not something that should be imposed on all gay Christians. Paul says in 1 Cor. 7:8-9, “*It is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control they should marry.*”

The creation stories point to our capacity for relationships and to covenantal bonds that form families. These passages do not address directly or rule out the possibility of same-sex covenantal relationships which allow gay Christians to create a family.

2. What does the Bible prohibit?

Traditional Answer – All homosexual activity

New Answer – All sexual immorality (abusive, degrading, promiscuous, lustful, casual)

Sin of Sodom and Gomorrah – Gang Rape and Abusing Foreigners

Genesis 19:1-15

⁴But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house;⁵ and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.”

⁶Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.”

⁹But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down.

a) Gang Rape and Abusing foreign guests - Later Biblical references which point back to Sodom and Gomorrah do not identify homosexuality as the primary sin here. See Isaiah 4:4-10 (inequity, evil, corruption), Jeremiah 23:14 (adultery, lies, evil, wickedness), Ezekiel 16:49 (pride, excess), Amos 4:1-11 (oppress the poor, crush the needy, eat and drink to excess), Zephaniah 2:8-11 (pride and idolatry), Luke 10:8-12 (failure to welcome disciples), 2 Peter 2:6-8 (licentiousness and lawlessness), and Jude 7 (sexual immorality and unnatural lust).

b) Historical Context and the Daughters – The story also reflects the historical context in which the life of a woman was not understood to be as valuable as the life of a man, and part of the offense of homosexuality in the ancient world was that it treated a man like a woman.

Holiness Code – Being Faithful in a Culture of Idolatry and Death

Leviticus 20:13 (And Parallel in Leviticus 18:22)

¹³If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

a) The “Holiness Code” – Purpose was to separate the people of Israel from their pagan neighbors who practiced idolatry, immorality, and injustice. There was a particular concern about cultic male prostitution. See 1 Kings 15:12, “Asa put away the male temple prostitutes out of the land and removed the idols their ancestors had made.”

b) An Abomination Does Not Equal “Sin” – The Old Testament laws call a wide variety of activities an “abomination” that we do not consider sinful. The issue is acting like the Gentiles.

c) Historical Context and the Law – The Old Testament laws also require behavior which we no longer understand as God’s will. See Dt. 22:28-29 – *“If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her, he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.”* The principle remains important, to protect vulnerable women, but the rule changes in a new context – we don’t make young women marry their rapist. John Piper, a conservative theologian, has written that *“There are laws in the Old Testament that are not expressions of God’s will for all time, but expressions of how best to manage sin in particular people at a particular time.”* (God and the Gay Christian p.93)

The lasting teaching in all these texts is that when Israel follows the ways of the world around it rather than remaining faithful to God there will be serious consequences. The death penalty here reflects the seriousness of Israel imitating their neighbors who practice idolatry, violence and injustice – such behavior brings death.

Paul’s Description of the Gentiles’ Sin in Romans – Idolatry and “Degrading Passions”

Romans 1:22-31

²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

a) What is condemned? – Idolatry, “degrading passions”, “consumed with passion”, “shameless acts,” wickedness, evil ...” Paul is condemning Roman sexual immorality – cultic prostitution, men taking young boys, Emperors hosting orgies. Paul is not condemning faithful

Christians who want to make a life time commitment to each to live in self-giving, self-sacrificial love.

b) Unnatural - Means “not according to custom.” See 1 Cor. 11:13-16, “¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? ¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” The custom, or what was natural in the historical context, was for the man to be dominate and the female to be passive. Anything else was considered unnatural. And so all homosexual activity was considered to be unnatural and degrading.

James Brownson summarizes Paul’s teaching about sexuality in Romans 1 saying, “*Whenever either heterosexual or same-sex behavior is driven by lust and licentiousness, whenever it violates the honor and dignity of persons as that dignity is understood and expressed in a particular cultural setting, such behavior should be regarded as shameful. ... It is quite another matter however, when the desire to love and to be loved by someone of the same sex is shamed. ... To insist that moderated, loving, same-sex desires are incapable of being sanctified is to attempt to make equivalencies between same-sex desires and more toxic relationships where they simply do not exist.*” (p.218-219)

Vice Lists – Excess and Exploitation

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

⁹*Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

1 Timothy 1:8-11

⁸*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. ⁹This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, ¹⁰fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurors, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.*

a) “Male Prostitutes” – Translation of the Greek word “malkos” = “soft” or “effeminate” – Most common usage is not regarding homosexual activity but for men who did anything typically associated with a woman.

b) “Sodomites” – Translation of the Greek “arsenokoitai” = “sexual or economic exploitation.” The KJV translates it “abusers of themselves with mankind” and a 1729 translation used “the brutal.” It was not translated as “homosexuals” until the mid-twentieth century when the concept of homosexuality as an orientation arose.

c) Excess or Exploitation - The other vices on the lists are some form of excess or exploitation. Neither word understood in its historical context seems to point to homosexuality as an orientation or to sexual practice within a committed life long relationship **3. What Does Our Experience Teach Us?**

Jesus’ Teaching on A Tree and It’s Fruit

Matthew 7:15-20

¹⁵“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.”

a) The Good Fruit Test – Matthew Vines says, “*Jesus’ test is simple: if something bears bad fruit, it cannot be a good tree. And if something bears good fruit, it cannot be a bad tree.*” (God and the Gay Christian p.14) Other passages point to the same principle, even if it means rethinking Old Testament laws, such as accepting Gentiles into the church without the Old Testament requirement of circumcision. (Acts 15:8-10) Christians rejected slavery in spite of passages such as Ephesians 6:5, “*slaves obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling ...*” and Colossians 3:22, “*Slaves obey your earthly masters in everything ...*” because slavery clearly produced bad fruit.

b) The Bad Fruit – Our condemnation of all homosexual practice, and the implied condemnation of homosexuals as people, is producing bad fruit. Young people who are gay are confused and ashamed, driving a high suicide rate. Parents sometimes feel they have to choose between their child and their church. Families and churches are divided. The church is seen as judgmental and anti-science.

c) Scripture and Experience – Jesus is clear that our experience of God at work in the world helps clarify the meaning of Scripture. Our experience of faithful gay couples can help us understand the teaching and the prohibitions of Scripture more clearly.

Conclusion

The Bible does not condemn homosexuality as an orientation or prohibit gays from entering into committed lifelong relationships which create a family and produce the good fruit of self-giving, sacrificial love. Rather, these relationships can be blessed and recognized as a means of grace.

For a more detailed argument, see God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships by Matthew Vines, The Bible's Yes to Same Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart by Mark Achtemeier and Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same Sex Relationships by James Brownson

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. Are we changing or ignoring Scripture?

No. We are growing in our understanding of Scripture. Jesus said, "*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.*" (John 16:12) Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. But our understanding of Christ's will for us grows.

2. Is this a slippery slope? Does this mean anything goes?

No. Support for gay marriage is in some ways a conservative approach. It recognizes and conserves the value of marriage as a life-long committed relationships between two people. It simply recognizes that two people of the same sex can enjoy the benefits and discipline of becoming family.

3. Does this mean that anything that comes "naturally" is ok?

No. There are many desires which should be resisted. There are things that come naturally which are bad. We are simply recognizing that the natural desire of gay Christians to find a partner and form a family is not disordered or sinful.

4. Do we have to call it marriage?

Probably so, to give full civil rights and religious recognition. "Different but equal" might be a repeat of "Separate but equal," which did not work well.

5. What about children?

There will always be plenty of straight couples to produce children. Children are a good, but not a necessary part of marriage. Two loving, married parents raising children is a good thing.

6. Are we caving in to culture rather than following God?

No. We are always influenced by a variety of cultures. Most of our views towards homosexuality grow out of the culture in which we were raised. The traditional view is influenced by culture as much as by the Bible. And the new view, while influenced by culture, is not determined by culture but by new understandings of Scripture. We also recognize that God "always had friends outside of Israel," and that he continues to use outsiders to correct the church. Both the traditional and the new view believe they are being faithful to God's teaching that comes through Scripture.

6. How can we keep this issue from dividing and distracting the church?

We cannot ignore the issue of same-sex marriage, and we will sometimes have to make decisions about it. But we can keep it from dividing or distracting our church by keeping the issue in its proper perspective, and by listening carefully and sympathetically to those with whom we disagree. And we can focus on the many and much more important areas where we agree – seeking to love God and love neighbor and join in God’s mission in and to our world.