

Reflections on
Homosexuality
and
Same-Sex
Marriage

William T. Cherry
United Methodist Pastor, Retired

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a response to the current—and often contentious—debate in the United Methodist Church on the cluster of issues around the meaning and implications of homosexuality. It has raised challenges to a variety of definitions and sanctions on the subject as set out in its Book of Discipline, which guides its life and work.

Of course, it's not the only body which has been plagued with the divisive effects of this discussion. In fact, there are few issues of personal morality today that are so widely debated and as emotionally charged as those connected with homosexuality (a subject that often uses the initials LGBTQ to indicate its wide scope¹). That broad currency is likely due to the fact that, on the one hand, it invokes justice concerns for social liberals as well as clear theological and biblical questions for social conservatives on the other.

In the public arena, one would expect arguments from the former to dominate, but given the strong conservative bent in today's thinking, one should not be surprised that biblically-based arguments have also become part of the public discourse.

Assuming that Christians are committed to a biblical foundation for such important moral and social issues, there are two concerns that have impeded reaching a strong—and broadly defensible—position on this whole subject.

First, there is how scripture is used to defend the traditional (and more conservative) point of view: typically, a literalist and simplistic understanding of the handful of biblical references on the subject of homosexuality.

¹ Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Questioning persons, and this reference doesn't exhaust the varied meanings of our sexuality. In popular parlance, "gay" is frequently used as a shorthand reference to these persons.

Second, from the opposite (and more liberal) point of view, there seems to be a willingness, when the Bible doesn't provide clear guidance on such social concerns, to set them easily aside and find sufficient argument in the claims of civil rights advocates, and the like. And this seems particularly true with regard to same-sex marriage.

However, to my mind, both these approaches represent biases that prevent us from doing justice to the source of our convictions as Christians.

In the former case, I believe our thinking is hamstrung by a reliance on a literalist approach to biblical understanding. None of us, in fact, takes everything in scripture at face value. Familiar examples are its dietary laws, the suppression of women, and the institution of slavery. We reject these on the basis of the principle of historicity, which insists that recognizing the historical context at the time of the Bible's writing is essential if we're to grasp its proper meaning for today. In the same way, therefore, we need to look at homosexuality as it was known *then* as opposed to how it is understood *now* before deciding if it is right to take literally what seems to be the Bible's sharp condemnation of it.

In the second instance, while social justice is clearly a biblical mandate, the questions involving homosexuality are *ontological* as well as *social*, that is, they invoke the biblical doctrine of creation—and specifically our creation as human beings. Therefore, if we take the Bible seriously, we must ground our thinking about gay and lesbian matters under that rubric.

Before we look specifically at same-sex marriage, therefore, we need to revisit some of the prior concerns about homosexuality itself, and try to consider all of them in the light of a biblical understanding of God's purposes in creation.

I. ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY ITSELF

If we are to find solid biblical guidance on this subject, it must begin with a fundamental shift in our thinking from the long-held assumption—following scripture, we thought—that whatever involves the practice of our sexuality is exclusively a function of opposite-sex relationships.

A key part of that assumption has been that a same-sex relationship was a matter of individual choice, and since we believed that to be outside God’s intention for us, it was fundamentally sinful.² And in spite of how familiar we have become with the LGBTQ scene today, that belief is still held by many people today.

To endorse something different from that entails, to begin with, a willingness to admit the reality of same-sex *orientation*. And there is no evidence that the writers of scripture knew anything about that! They knew only about homosexual *practice*; and because of its pagan associations that had idolatrous implications, according to their patriarchal thinking, homosexuality is condemned out of hand in the couple passages in which it is clearly mentioned.

If, however, we can accept that some people are *born gay*, and that same-sex attraction, therefore, is not a choice but a genetic bent native to them, then the issue of its sinfulness can be set aside. Their homosexuality is what God made them to be, and we can acknowledge then that it’s normal—and right—for them. Any argument with that ought to be with God, not with them.

This represents a fundamental change from what was generally believed until just a couple decades ago more and more members

² This invokes the “order of creation” argument, based on the Genesis statement: “male and female he [God] created them” (1:27), implying only an opposite sex attraction.

of the gay community emerged from hiding and we began talking more openly together. The result has been that many of us from the “straight” side have heard—and believed—their witness (perhaps even that of a family member) that they had always known they were “different” sexually.

Yet, this has often been a difficult transition to make—even after such testimony forced us to consider the possibility of an inborn same-sex attraction. And because of the deep emotional resistance toward accepting that, getting to know gay persons and hearing their stories is still the best way to negotiate that first critical step.

But then this also requires a willingness to look for alternative meanings for the handful of biblical texts that call homosexuality an unqualified evil—an “abomination” before God!³ And there are valid such explanations to be found, but that’s the subject of another paper.

A help in this change of mind may also be found in the 1973 action by the American Psychiatric Association which removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. In other words, since being lesbian/gay is not a choice, it should not be looked at pathologically; that is, as an illness from which one needed to be—or could be—healed. In fact, in the light of the condemnation to which gays and lesbians are still subjected, one can hardly imagine anyone, under normal circumstances, choosing that lifestyle.

Having said this, however, one must recognize that such a choice is still sometimes made: For example, someone who has suffered abuse from a person of the opposite sex, may only be able to experience a satisfying intimate relationship with a person of the same sex.

3 Leviticus 18:22

This new mindset also needs to consider, in biblical terms, the purposes of such a fundamental part of our humanity as our sexuality. Two primary purposes are pointed to there.

The first and obvious one is biological propagation, that is, the need to bear offspring to preserve humanity from extinction. In the creation account of Genesis 1, the command of God was given to all creatures of the earth—animal and human alike: “Be fruitful and multiply.” Because physical procreation is only how life can continue, one can in no way undervalue that role of sex—in human terms! The sacred nature of it is also made clear there in the declaration of God’s explicit blessing on his creatures in that pursuit.⁴

In this first account, the initial reference to humankind uses the generic term “man” (we would say “humanity”): “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our own image.’”⁵ While a gender differentiation is then given in passing—“male and female he created them,”⁶ it is mentioned to indicate—in the very next verse—their need to be reproductive.⁷

In Genesis 2, a second purpose of sex is set out, which is just as fundamental in the creative economy of God, and it has to do with the defining nature of his human creatures!

In this story, “the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him.’”⁸ Here, one of the most basic things about us as humans is provided for: the

4 Genesis 1:22, 28

5 Ibid,1:26

6 Genesis 1:27

7 This use of “man” in the creation stories (Gen. 1 & 2), is a generic reference to humanity and not meant to be gender specific (masculine). Even in subsequent chapters, after the woman was created (and named Eve), the name Adam given then to the man is not technically a proper name, but a common noun meaning humankind.

8 Genesis 2:18

capacity for relationship. This is, in fact, an initial way in which we bear the image of God, and it provides the framework for what is most essential to our humanity—the calling to love!

Hence, the first commandment of Jesus was to love God with all we have and are, and the second, similar to it, was to love one another.⁹

While that “helper” God made for the man might suggest nothing more than the creation of the *other* gender, the context clearly implies that it refers to a specific other who is to be partner in the life the two will have together, with all that entails. And a special love is to obtain between them.

While there may be other human relationships deep enough to merit the term loving, this one is distinctive because out of it comes this lifelong partnership! But it is also true because of the *sexual* appeal that is fundamental to establishing that unique connection. The point here is that the sex drive, one of the most compelling of human impulses, is fundamental to the task of founding and sustaining the family covenant that’s at the heart of God’s human enterprise.

When that attraction—both personal and sexual—is between two persons of the *same* gender, then that loving and enduring *homosexual* relationship is comparable in every way to the one connecting a *heterosexual* couple.



⁹ Mark 12:28-34

II. ABOUT PRACTICING SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

This addresses the issue of sexual relations between persons of the same gender, which would seem to follow from the above argument. But, in fact, it has proven harder for people to acknowledge than simply an innate same-sex attraction. So, while we do see today a growing acceptance of homosexual *orientation*, there is still widespread resistance to allowing homosexual *practice*.

We see this, for example, in our United Methodist denial of ordination and appointment to “self-avowed, *practicing* homosexuals.”¹⁰ Presumably, we can ordain a gay person, but only if he/she were willing to commit to a life of celibacy.

This is probably part of our long-standing discomfort with discussing anything about our sexuality: Parents, for example, have been reluctant—and embarrassed—even to have the rudimentary “birds and bees” conversation with their younger kids. And educators have often been conflicted on how to approach the subject except in strictly biological terms. The effect of that, along with the loosening of restraints by the “sexual revolution of the 60s, is that teenagers learn pretty much on their own, often getting their education by experimentation—with a generous assist from the ubiquity of sexual themes in the media.

At the same time, while relaxing the reins on sexual practice, we haven’t fostered a broader understanding of what sex really means. Our failure in this, for which the church bears particular responsibility, has meant a tacit denial of its special stature, with the effect that has on the meaning of intimate human relationships themselves.

¹⁰ *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, par. 304.3

An initial affirmation needed about our sexual nature, therefore, must be its fundamental goodness—including the practice of it! And it has the divine blessing as the most intimate reinforcement of a human relationship. Far from the shame that has sometimes been attached to it, its practice, in the proper context, is to be celebrated as part of the creation that the Author of life called “very good.” In other words, we are designed to be sexually active creatures.

But the locus for the proper practice of this fundamental part of our nature is a loving—and committed—relationship between those involved. And this implies a couple things, beginning by insisting that the practice of sex is not a casual thing meant simply to satisfy the animal instinct in us. In a real sense, it is the most human and personal thing we can do, and one with deep and lasting consequences.

Specifically, it is meant to be a reflection and expression—the consummation, in fact!—of the special devotion we have for the one with whom we practice it, and out of which *might* come new life, not only biologically but psychically and spiritually. Anything short of using sex in these terms is prostituting this divine gift, and, in fact, destructive of the relationship with that other.

We must add, however, that celebrating sex in this way between two committed lovers is not to demean the special calling of celibacy, but only to say that not being allowed to have sex is to be assigned to an “unnatural” status that must be individually elected and for very personal reasons.

The conclusion should be, therefore, that when sex functions in this vitally important way to seal—and sanctify—the loving relationship between two persons, it should not be confined to those of opposite genders? (And this issue is very much part of our United Methodist Disciplinary dilemma.)

Again, our resistance to allowing that grows out of the cultural mores which have long rejected the notion of two men or two women in bed having physical relations. But setting aside such prejudices, the point to be honored here is that the physical body, with all its physical and emotional connections, is put to the service of a loving relationship, and, in biblical terms, relationship is what most defines our nature as human beings. And, when that circumstance obtains, a physical relationship is appropriate for anyone regardless of his or her sexual orientation?

But this caveat: From this understanding of our sexual nature, it would also clearly follow that sexual promiscuity is wrong and destructive — for everyone — both straight and gay! What God has made, and called good, cannot be turned toward selfish and unworthy ends. Inevitably, such behavior will have lasting effects, and may be an impediment in establishing a more satisfying future relationship.



III. ABOUT SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Logically, this is the last term in the process of normalizing LGBTQ relationships. It began by recognizing the God-given reality of homosexuality as an inborn variant of creation, which led then to an acceptance of the physical aspects of such relationships in the same way we assume for heterosexuals.

The end of this movement is the recognition of marriage as the legitimate social and spiritual fulfillment of gay relationships.

In society as a whole, as gays and lesbians began to emerge from their ‘closeted’ existence and seek the acceptance they wanted and the fair treatment they deserved, the question of their civil rights moved to the forefront of the debate. Challenges were mounted to laws limiting those rights and privileges, and, over the past couple decades, states have removed the most obvious and onerous of them from the books. But, in fact, some of those oppressive restrictions—in jobs, housing and public accommodations—still obtain, and certainly all of them will finally be removed, perhaps in the foreseeable future.

The last of these is the right to marry, and, at this moment, twenty-nine states do allow gay marriages.¹¹ But, as presently considered, it is being dealt with as a civil right—a social justice issue! Unlike debate around homosexuality itself, there has been little discussion of the biblical and theological warrant for gay marriage.¹²

To take up the question in these terms means we must ground it once again in the larger context of our human sexuality as the Bible knows it.

11 As of Oct. 16, 2014. Of the 29, where bans are still in place, appeals are on-going.

12 A very recent book, *The Bible Says Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*, by Mark Achtemeier (Westminster John Knox), does address this concern.

If, as I have said, the most *human* meaning of that is as an expression of one person's love for another with marriage being their public declaration of and commitment to that relationship; then, when one's sexual orientation is naturally and positively toward someone of the same sex, a wedding of such persons seems the logical—and proper—thing to support.

This suggests that we must see marriage as *gender neutral* and declare it right and good for all couples—of whatever sexual orientation! In other words, we would accept marriage without the longstanding—and popularly assumed—*opposite* gender definition as only between a man and a woman. But this is what is insisted on in many of the legal—and religious—challenges being raised to same-sex marriage, based either on cultural tradition and practice or on the biblical assumptions.

But many in our society have already come to accept gay and lesbian marriage, reflected in the oft-heard sentiment: “Why shouldn't two people of the same gender, who have a loving commitment to each other, be able to get married?”

Interestingly enough, that question—from the world at large—points to the fundamental basis of the institution itself—a “loving relationship.” And, as said here, relationship is the bedrock of the whole biblical message, between God and us, and among us as his human offspring. In the creation account, this same commitment is alluded to in the marriage covenant when that relationship meant that “a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife.”¹³

Ever since then, confining marriage to gender opposites worked well enough until we learned about the reality of homosexuality as a constitutional inborn thing. And because gays and lesbians are part of the human family, and of “sacred worth” before God as we

13 Genesis 2:24

Methodists say,¹⁴ with all that implies theologically, it would seem to follow, in keeping with the larger purposes of our covenant God, that two of them should also be allowed to marry!

To face this toughest challenge, the Apostle Paul may be helpful when he describes the divine nature of the marital commitment by comparing it to the devotion between Christ and his Church.¹⁵ While in another place he gives “Church” a feminine gender (as the “bride” of Christ¹⁶), men are also part of the Church, and obviously, therefore, the emphasis is not to be on gender but on the mutual commitment between Christ and all of us — female and male.

His point is that the love to which we are called, including that of two persons who are joined in marriage, is to model what the covenant love of God means, and surely that applies — in its most demanding ways — to this most intimate of relationships.

Love, in these profound terms, supersedes any gender distinctions, so that, if that Godly covenant connection is at the heart of marriage and home and family, then we can conclude it is as much validated in same-sex as in opposite-sex marriages.

This violates, of course, what has always been the case — at least in public terms, but perhaps Paul made room for this larger understanding when he admitted in writing to the Ephesians that this kind of spousal covenant is “a great mystery,”¹⁷ and, as we are learning today, our nature as sexual beings is still fraught with mystery.

There is still another perspective that suggests the short-sightedness of denying marriage to the significant gay segment of our society.

14 *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, par. 161(F)

15 Ephesians 5:21-33

16 2 Corinthians 11:2

17 Ephesians 5:32

Society has always recognized marriage as one of the key factors in securing the stability of its communal life, and has given it legal and social status as a way of encouraging lasting marriages and thereby realizing the benefits that come through the solid families they produce.

But, then, why should not the church—and society—also bless same-sex marriage as a means of declaring for gays and lesbians the same sanctity—and legality—of their relationship that we do for hetero-marriages, and have them thereby become part of the effort to help make marriage and family central to a stable and wholesome society.

With co-habitation before marriage becoming more and more common, and tying the knot being postponed indefinitely by many couples today, marriage seems more and more to be an optional thing, and the necessity of such a civil or religious institution increasingly questioned.

Part of the reason for this is the fear—and frequency—of marital failures. Current divorce statistics still suggest the break-up of one of every two marriages, and while there are probably no good numbers on the split up of co-habiting couples, the failure of such relationships surely has the same—if not more—tragic effect on those involved and on society at large.

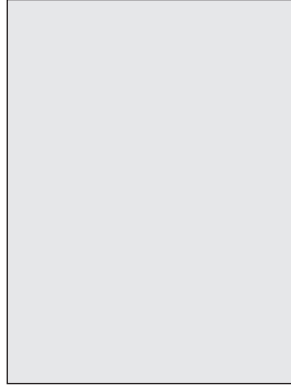
In the light of all the foregoing, I believe it is in keeping with the intention of God that any two persons—gay or straight—who are bound in covenant love to one another should be able to solemnize that relationship in a civil—and sacred—marriage, and, as scripture says, with his full approval, “become one flesh.”¹⁸

November, 2014



18 Genesis 2:24

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



William T. Cherry
United Methodist pastor, retired

Short bio lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, at eos sumo recteque, ex usu graeco abhorreant delicatissimi. Cu nihil feugiat eam. Oblique nostrud no his, mei omnis phaedrum adversarium an. Eum te choro sanctus, diceret ceteros ea nec. Eam no veritus corpora, tempor putent alienum his in, amet partiendo has ne. Eum clita tation possim in, eu aperiam tractatos usu. Sea occurreret disputationi ea, sensibus pericula no pri, has audire regione civibus cu. Ius putant copiosae ne, idque mundi ei vel, vim facete albucius mentitum an. Et duo discere lobortis. At has dicunt placerat expetendis, in quo fugit harum, doming epicuri omittam id est.

An forensibus definitiones usu, pri cu wisi scripserit. Eum habeo inciderint ei, eu sint cotidieque duo. Erant eligendi ius cu. Pri no noster salutandi. Ea his volumus luptatum assueverit, ea doming detracto repudiandae vel, cu ius duis percipitur interpretaris.

Embrace blurb?

