

## A Traditionalist Viewpoint

Though the Bible does not often address homosexuality (six instances in total), those portions of scripture all point in the same direction—that sex between two people of the same gender is sinful. In the Old Testament, homosexuality appears within a list of sexual practices (Leviticus 18) that we would all affirm as sinful today—adultery, incest, bestiality, and so on. Within the New Testament, the apostle Paul mentions it three times. Twice he includes homosexuality within lists of “sins of the flesh.” (“Flesh” in this instance doesn’t refer to our sexuality alone, but more generally to the fallen nature that rebels against God.) The most extensive passage in which homosexuality is discussed is in Romans 1:18-32. Paul describes men sleeping with men and women sleeping with women, and holds up both as examples of how pagans have rebelled against God by exchanging natural relations for unnatural ones.

Jesus does not address the question of homosexuality directly, but he does speak about marriage. In Matthew 19, Jesus is asked a question about divorce, and in his response he quotes two passages from the Creation story of Genesis. First he says, “Haven’t you read that ‘God created them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one.” In this response, we see Jesus’ affirmation of a binary understanding of gender (male and female) as well as a definition of marriage (man and wife). This is God’s design for marriage—a life-long commitment between a man and a woman, who seek to love one another as a reflection of God’s steadfast love for us all.

When Adam & Eve chose to eat of “the tree of knowledge of good and evil,” the temptation was to be gods for themselves, defining (and redefining) for themselves what was right and wrong rather than receiving from God and trusting Him. Sexuality is merely one area in which we seek to do this in our lives, giving authority to the sinful desires themselves. Their choice to rebel against God distorted creation, and our desires as human beings became disordered as a result, so that we experience desires contrary to what God desires for us (this is the “flesh” to which Paul refers). Same-sex attraction is real; it is not chosen. But it is a consequence of the fall—an expression of the “disordered desires” that we all struggle with.

Having these desires is not in and of itself sinful. While those who are gay do not “choose” to be attracted to the same sex, they can choose what to do with those desires. They can choose to live a life of celibacy as a way of honoring their relationship with God. This is not a “special burden” placed upon those who are gay. Rather, it is the requirement of all who live a Christian life—we must discipline our desires to bring them into alignment with God’s will. Even for those who are heterosexual, there are only two options for faithful living: fidelity in marriage or celibacy in singleness. And while not everyone is called to the married life, everyone experiences singleness at some point in their lives. Both before we are married, and after we are married (in the case of widowhood or divorce).

We should not paint singlehood as “punishment” for those who are gay. Rather, we must ask the question of how someone could flourish as a gay person who is celibate. Marriage is not the only way to flourish. We are all called to build communities of love and acceptance—communities where people can experience purpose, friendship, belonging, and wholeness. The church should be such a place, for both gay and straight people. As the church, we are called to be holy, to be set apart. The culture will always embrace different beliefs and practices which directly contradict God’s. Our place is not to assimilate to the world’s values, but kindly, winsomely, and lovingly live out the way of Jesus in the world, trusting him and obeying his commands to us.

In the end, the church is called to welcome all people to Christ’s table, regardless of sexual orientation or lifestyle. We are called to love all our neighbors in Christ’s name. But we cannot endorse same-sex marriage, because we believe it to be a lifestyle out of keeping with God’s directions for our lives. We want all people to flourish, and flourishing cannot happen when we are deliberately choosing to live in sin. Compassionate love calls us to walk with our gay brothers and sisters in friendship and fidelity, helping them to find fulfillment in a life of celibacy devoted to God.

## A Progressive Viewpoint

Scripture is a gift. It is the record of a community of people who have walked closely with God. It contains all that is required for faithful living with God. We believe Scripture is inspired—that God’s Spirit was present and working in the process of writing, so that Scripture communicates timeless truths that speak across the ages. However, scripture is not inerrant—it was written by people whose understanding of the world was limited by the culture in which they lived. When we read scripture, we must make every effort to understand the context in which it was written and must take great care to rightly understand how scripture speaks to the cultural moment in which we live.

One way to approach scripture is through the theological concept of revelation. (Not to be confused with the “Book of Revelation” at the end of the Bible.) The Bible is a record of how God revealed Godself to the people of ancient Israel. Revelation is not static—revelation unfolds over time, as we come to know and understand more of who God is. Some of the earliest portions of scripture reflect a tribal understanding of Yahweh—not as the one true God of the universe, but simply as the God of Israel. Even after Israel came to understand Yahweh as the one true God who created all things, they still believed God destined them to rule over all people, so that through them all people would come to know Yahweh as God.

As Christians, we believe Jesus is the fullest revelation we have of who God is. Through Jesus, we understand God’s purpose was not only to redeem his chosen people, but to open his covenant of salvation to people of all nations and ages. The disciples did not initially understand this, at first their messages were directed to Jewish audiences alone. But the Spirit moved the disciples outward, sending Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch and Peter to the house of Cornelius. God’s plan was to include those who had once been outside the covenant of God’s love.

The revelation of God, then, moves in a particular direction. The arc of Scripture is towards greater and greater inclusion. (Or as MLK said, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Justice is a close parallel to inclusion, because it affirms the basic dignity and rights of all people.) Over the centuries, the Spirit has continued to lead the church to greater justice and inclusion. Although some have used scripture to justify slavery and racism or to deny equality to women, the “yeast” of the Gospel has always worked to break down the walls of social inequality.

We believe in an inclusive God because that is the God we see revealed in Jesus. This belief in an inclusive God becomes the “lens” through which we understand scripture. When we read in Genesis 1:27 that “God created humankind in his own image, male and female he created them,” we do not read this as a narrow affirmation of binary gender, but as a wonderful affirmation of the dignity of all people, regardless of gender. When we read the earliest description of the covenant of marriage in Genesis 2:24, we put the emphasis not on gender (man and wife) but rather on the level of commitment and fidelity that is being described (two becoming one flesh).

God calls us to live in holiness and love, not sin. So how do we recognize sin? Sin is whenever we fall short of Jesus’ command to love God and to love our neighbor. We can recognize sin by the harm it does, both to ourselves and others. Another helpful plumbline to recognize sin is the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Sin will never contribute to the growth of these virtues in our lives.

So we must ask: Is same-sex marriage opposed to the fruit of the Spirit? Can two people of the same gender pledge their lives to one another, and live within that covenant as a way of experiencing and growing in God’s grace (just as two people of opposite gender may do)? If so, what would make that covenant sinful? On the flip side, we must ask if the church’s opposition to same-sex marriage might be doing harm. Are we thereby excluding the vulnerable and compounding the hurt and rejection they’ve experienced? Have we damaged our witness in the world, particularly to the younger generation which has moved increasingly towards acceptance of the LGBTQ community?

In the end, those on the progressive side of the church agree with traditionalists that the Bible describes two pathways for faithful expression of our sexuality: fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness. However, we believe that the covenant of marriage should be opened to include those of the same gender, that we should support and affirm their marriages as a pathway towards glorifying God and growing in God’s grace, just as we all are doing.