

Same Sex Marriage¹

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Does God want us to *understand* his general law, or just blindly obey it as a miscellaneous collection of rules and regulations with no rhyme or reason that we are able to understand?

The Pharisees thought that the way to be righteous was to keep to hundreds of rules and regulations, and put a hedge around the law, and a hedge around the hedge. The common people who did not have the skill to memorise all these rules, or the leisure or wherewithal to keep them all, were therefore considered to be under God's curse (Jn 7:49).

On the other hand, the psalmist says "Taste and see that the Lord is good", (Ps 34:8, cf 1 Peter 2:3) Ps 119 is a meditation on how beautiful, perfect and wonderful is God's law: "your ordinances are good" (v39), "Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them." (v129), "Your decrees are righteous for ever; give me understanding that I may live" (v144). Jesus says "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (Jn 15:15). Although Paul calls himself a servant (slave) of God, he also says "We are God's fellow workers" (1 Cor 3:9)

God delights to reveal Himself and share his heart with us. He has given us the basis on which the whole law depends. Jesus says that "On these two commandments [love God and love your neighbour] hang all the law and the prophets". Paul says "The commandments... and any other commandment, are summed up in this word 'Love your neighbour as yourself' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Rom 13:9-10. Also "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" Gal 5:14.

This leads to the concept that James Brownson in his book "Bible, Gender, Sexuality" calls "Moral Logic": we need to determine not just *what* a particular law says but *why* it is there and what does it *mean*: both for the people it was originally given to and to us. The law was delivered to a particular people at a particular time in a particular context, but was based on universal principles: so we should be able to trace its meaning back to the law of love. As Paul says, any and every commandment is summed up in "Love your neighbour as yourself". For example, what does "you shall not put on a garment made with two different materials" (Lev 19:19) actually mean for Christians today? What about "You shall not clip off the edges of your beard"? Many of the laws which appear strange to us are aimed directly at the idolatrous activities of the surrounding nations.

Clobber Passages

Gen 19, Sodom and Gomorrah. All the men in the city surrounded Lot's house where the angels were staying and demanded that they be brought out so that they could have sex with them. This passage is clearly about rape, and has nothing to say about consensual same-sex relations in committed relationships. Isaiah says that Israel has become like Sodom and Gomorrah and therefore, this is what they need to do: "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Is 1:9-17). In Jer 23:14 the sin of Sodom is adultery and lies. In Ex 16:48-49 the sin of Sodom is pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, and not aiding the poor and needy.

Lev 18:22, 20:13 "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination", Lev 20:13 adds "they shall be put to death". The context here is the Molech worship carried out in the surrounding nations, and in the nations that the Israelites drove out. (The word translated "abomination" is generally used in the context of idol worship.) Molech worship involved child sacrifice (mentioned in the immediately preceding verse, Lev 18:21) and temple prostitution. Dt 23:17-18 explicitly refers to male and female cult prostitutes as an "abomination". (Cf 1 Kings 14:24) In this context, the moral logic is clear. So these verses say nothing about consensual same-sex relations in committed relationships.

In Romans 1:18-32 Paul is describing extreme sins which even the people who commit them know are wrong. The people he describes did not honour God, worshipped idols and then became so filled with lust that they gave up their natural, i.e. innate, passion for the opposite sex in an unbridled search for pleasure. Their lives were filled with covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit etc. "They received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" is interpreted by some as a reference to Gaius Caligula: who would certainly fit the description. He was stabbed through the genitals and killed by a military officer whom he has sexually humiliated. The purpose of the whole passage Rom 1:18-32 is to lead up to Rom 2:1: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."

¹ The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of Vineyard Churches™. Any resemblance to the opinions of any other person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10, Paul uses two words which are difficult to translate: “arsenokoites” and “malakos”. This probably refers to the sexual use of younger boys (*malakoi*) by older men (*arsenokoitai*). In 1 Tim 1:10 the word *arsenokoitai* is preceded by the word *pornoi* meaning male prostitute and followed by a word meaning “kidnapper”. In the ancient world these pederastic relationships were transitory, rather than permanent and committed; they were driven by the desires of the older partner rather than being mutual and shared, and were often characterised by abuse, slavery and prostitution. The most likely translation is either a reference to cult prostitution or, more broadly, to a man who aggressively forces himself on another.

So none of the passages are relevant to committed, loving, consensual, same-sex relationships.

Some attempts by Christians to explain the “Moral logic” of these passages in a way which can be applied to these same-sex relationships:

1. Marriage is inherently hierarchical with the man being the dominant party and the woman submissive. (In Greek and Roman society, sex was always between unequals: a dominant man penetrating a submissive low-status partner, whether male or female. Females were, of course, inherently of low status.) It is humiliating and degrading for a man to treat another man as a woman (via penetrative sex). Same sex marriage would be a marriage between equals, and therefore un-Biblical.
2. Marriage is inherently between two people who are radically different (a male and a female): same sex marriage is forbidden because it is between two people who are “too similar”. This concept appears nowhere in the Bible: Adam’s response on seeing Eve is “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”: unlike all the animals, Adam at last meets another human being with whom he can have a deep relationship because, as God said, “It is not good that man should be alone”. Scientifically, the range of variations within each gender are greater than the typical differences between each gender. Also, scientifically, the human race is not divided neatly into two genders: about 1 in 2,000 people are “intersex” in some way: a group which therefore includes several million people. (One Christian writer gets round this problem by saying that intersex people are not human: this is the argument that some Christians used to use to justify the slave trade). How are we to determine who is a “man” and who is a “woman”? Is it chromosomes? But intersex people can have a variety of chromosomes (XYY, X only, XXY and so on). Is it genitalia? But hormone treatment and surgery can change these. Is it gender preference or orientation? What about bisexuals? Is a transgender man a man or a woman? (Perhaps a transgender man should only marry a transgender woman: then we can be sure that there is only one of each, even if we still aren’t *quite* sure which is which!) Ultimately, all these arguments founder on the radical equality inherent in the Gospel: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Gal 3:28. Christ destroyed the three fundamental hierarchies of the ancient world. The arguments that are used to prove that women can teach, preach, lead and prophesy in the Church also apply to equality in marriage.
3. God is both male and female and the “image of God” is therefore only fully present within a marriage which includes both a male and a female. This means that single people are not “made in God’s image”. More seriously, it means that Jesus (a single male) was not “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).
4. The sole purpose of marriage and sex is procreation (this was Augustine’s view): so same-sex marriage is invalid because it cannot lead to children. But there are many heterosexual marriages which cannot lead to children (eg with a post-menopausal woman, or an infertile couple): are these un-Biblical? This idea is also used by some Christians to prohibit contraception.
5. Every example of a marriage in the Bible is between one man and one woman. Actually, this is not true: there are many examples in the Bible of marriages involving more than one woman (eg Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines). It is a very weak basis to claim that something is forbidden simply because there are no examples of that thing in the Bible. For example, some Christian groups forbid the use of musical instruments in worship, simply because these are not mentioned in the New Testament.
6. If we are not quite sure whether the verses apply to loving, committed, consensual same-sex relationships, perhaps we had better forbid them anyway “just to be on the safe side”. This is “putting a hedge around the law” and Jesus was very stern against those who teach human precepts as doctrine (Mt 15:9, Mk 7:7), and of those who lay heavy burdens on others (Mt 23:4). Anyone who teaches in this way but who also shaves, or trims their beard, or cuts the sides of their hair, or wears clothes made from two kinds of cloth (etc. etc.) is simply not being consistent!