

## **Theological and Pastoral Reflections on Gay Marriage**

Rev. Tim Ziegenhals

Amidst the storm that swirls about on the issue of gay marriage, in our state, our nation, and our denomination, I offer the following reflections for consideration. Most of what follows is in response to those who would seek to affirm gay marriage, on biblical grounds, including John H. Thomas, President of the U.C.C. In addressing the primary biblical texts that speak to the issue, I have put **their assertions in bold type**; my reflections and responses follow. My aim is to provide both theological, and pastoral consideration to those who struggle with this issue, so that we can be people who live out, like Jesus, both grace, and truth.

What can be troubling in this discussion is that the issue is often approached from extreme political positions. But, sexuality and marriage are neither conservative or liberal, right or left, issues. If we affirm in the bylaws of our church that “the Bible is the essential rule of faith and practice” (Article IV – Doctrine), the real question is this: How are we to come under the authority of the Word of God on the issue of marriage? Further, as followers of Jesus Christ, how are we, all of whom have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), to treat one another?

### I. Genesis 1:26-27; 2:20-24

**Assertion: “The discussion of marriage in Genesis is descriptive, not prescriptive. We find other kinds of marriage (e.g., polygamy) in the Bible.”**

A. The Genesis 1 text speaks of the uniqueness of humanity – as created in God’s image – and the sexual differentiation – male and female – that comes as a result of being created in that image. Then, Genesis 2 goes on to describe marriage as a reunion of those two, complementary sexual beings. To meet man’s most intimate need for companionship, God provided woman, a wholly other sexual being. These two, differentiated individuals, coming together, constitute a “one flesh.” relationship.

B. That this understanding of marriage is not just descriptive, but prescriptive as to God’s intention for marriage for all time is given voice by Jesus himself. When asked to comment on an issue regarding marriage (divorce), Jesus quoted Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 back-to-back as God’s creative intention for marriage. He further stated that this understanding of marriage comes from “the beginning of creation when God made them male and female . . .” (Mark 10:6). And according to Jesus, it still applies, for those who would follow him.

C. True, the Bible does record other kinds of marriage, such as polygamy. But it never affirms them as models of Godly family life, and in fact, records all of the trouble that comes to such families when they move away from God’s intention for marriage. Further, when he speaks of marriage to the members of the church (1 Cor. 6:16; Ephesians 5:31), the apostle Paul also cites the Genesis creation texts as the standard by which all marriage is to be measured.

### II. Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

**Assertion: “Prohibitions in Leviticus are mingled with numerous other prohibitions . . . which no one believes are binding for Christians today.”**

A. It is important to observe the different kinds of laws found in Leviticus. Yes, the *sacrificial* laws (i.e., regulations regarding animal sacrifices) are no longer binding on Christians today, due to the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus. Neither are the *ceremonial* laws (i.e., dietary restrictions, clothing and hair instructions) binding in an age where God is no longer working through the nation of Israel, seeking to keep her distinct from the nations around her so that she might testify to his unique being and love. Instead, in the age of the church, comprised of both Jew and Gentile, such national boundary markers have come to an end.

B. Now, the “boundary markers” for the church, revealing her to be distinct to those around her, center on the morality of her people. So, the *moral* aspects of the law still hold for the church. In fact, the prohibitions against homosexual behavior in Leviticus 18 and 20 lie right next to prohibitions against incest, bestiality, adultery, and child sacrifice, among others. They also include injunctions toward respect for parents, the elderly, and the poor. All of these are understood to still be binding on Christians.

C. Moreover, these prohibitions come within the context of, and actually bookend, the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). Such a command was obviously affirmed by Jesus (Matt. 22:39). Thus, the Levitical *moral* prohibitions can be seen as ways to exercise such neighbor love. And it is Jesus who explains that to love him is to obey what he commands (John 14:15).

D. Further still, the NT church understood there to be continuity with the OT teaching on sexual morality, and homosexual acts in particular. So, in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, we find homosexual acts included in lists of persons who do things unacceptable to God. That the term used in both of these NT texts for homosexual acts is derived from that found in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 is further confirmation that the *moral* guidance of the “older” covenant still applies to those who live under the new covenant. Notice also that motives for the act are not treated as morally significant. At issue is the fact that the complementarity of the sexes, initiated at creation, has been violated. Which leads to the next issue.

### III. Romans 1:18-32

**Assertion: “Paul’s admonitions against homosexual behavior seem clear, but he was writing in a time when no one had any concept of sexual orientation . . . [or] knowledge of life-long, monogamous homosexual relationships (i.e., gay marriage).**

**Paul is therefore condemning only exploitative, male prostitution between teachers and boys, or slaves.”**

A. To begin with Paul speaks against lesbian activity in Romans 1, as well as that between two men. Lesbianism was not usually associated with exploitation, and often involved long relationships. Thus, more than male prostitution must be in mind.

B. Secondly, saying that Paul, or anyone else in his time, would have had no knowledge or concept of a *non-exploitative* homosexual relationship is simply not true. There is vast literature from the Greco-Roman world, dating back to 500 B.C. that celebrated committed, homoerotic relationships. As well read as Paul was (cf. Acts 18:28), there is no reason to believe he would not have been familiar with such material. Further, Paul would have known of the Roman Emperor Nero’s own homosexual marriage to Sporus, and of the many such relationships that existed in Corinth, where Paul spent a good deal of time. Despite all of this, at no point does Paul say even the slightest positive thing about homosexual practice. Instead, every time he mentions it, he rejects it as an option for followers of Jesus.

C. Even more to the point is the overall context of Romans 1. In this chapter, Paul is speaking about the disordered human condition. At the root of our disorder is a failure to worship God as God; instead, the created order is what draws our hearts. This is idolatry. As the best example he can point to when it comes to such disorder, Paul cites homosexual behavior. Such behavior denies and abandons what is natural, meaning God's creative intent, not what is against a person's "natural orientation" (i.e., what Paul is not addressing is one who is naturally a heterosexual but who dabbles in homosexual practices that go "against his nature"). Regardless of whether a homosexual union is "loving and committed," regardless of whether homosexual behavior comes out of some sort of perceived orientation, it violates the complementarity of the sexes that God intended at creation, a complementarity that reveals and glorifies his image. Thus, homosexuality is one example, among many, of idolatry.

D. Considering just the matter of orientation, even if one were to have a genetic predisposition toward a certain kind of character, does it mean that such character needs to be acted on (such as alcoholism, which some believe has a genetic predisposition)? Are all inborn traits good and desirable? Unlike one's race, hair color, or left-handedness, how we practice our sexuality is a choice.

Many gay practitioners acknowledge this. Debra Kolodny, former coordinator for The National Bisexual Network, not only declared that there can be fidelity in threesomes ("It can be just as sanctified as anything else if all parties are agreed."), but also says, "I disagree with the queen movement [when it claims] that sexual orientation is predetermined. . . I know a lot of women who choose lesbianism." She believes that the "party line" of predetermination is part of the gay "political party line."

In fact, no matter who we are, each of us faces sexual temptation in a variety of forms. That is why the Bible has much to say about adultery, lust, and premarital promiscuity. In the end, we all have to make the choice: What do we do with our body? Do we realize that it is a "temple of the Holy Spirit" who is in us? Therefore, Paul instructs, "flee from sexual immorality" and "honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

#### IV. Jesus

**Assertion: "Jesus never said anything about homosexual relationships. He embraced a theology of inclusion."**

A. This is true, directly speaking. But neither did Jesus say anything about incest, bestiality, pedophilia, or threesomes. Why was he silent? Because the Hebrew Bible, which he upheld and was his scripture, was abundantly clear on such issues, as was the stance of the early Judaism within which he lived. What he tended to focus on were areas where the Jews of his day had twisted or misinterpreted the Old Testament, and needed to be corrected.

B. As mentioned above, Jesus does give implicit affirmation of the Father's original intention for a life-long marriage between a man and a woman as he responds to a question about divorce. Also worth noting in this response is his disciples' concern as to the difficulty of this teaching. To them, Jesus gives only two options – monogamous, heterosexual marriage, or celibacy (a "eunuch for the sake of the kingdom" Matt. 19:12). In other words, there is no third option. Even a life-long committed homosexual union was not considered by Jesus to be appropriate.

C. An additional, implicit but definitive reference to homosexual practice was spoken by Jesus when he said, "For from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual

immorality, theft, murder, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” (Mark 7:21). All Jews knew that the word translated “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) included same-sex intercourse.

D. As for Jesus’ theology of inclusion, it was certainly radical! He welcomed all into the kingdom of God, regardless of race, social standing, or gender. He ate with tax-collectors and prostitutes. But though his welcome was radical, so was his call on all who entered. “Go and sin no more,” was his word to the woman who had been caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Jesus was about welcome, and then *also* about transformation. He loves us just the way we are, but he loves us too much to keep us that way. His concern is certainly with fidelity, but with a fidelity that begins with living under the loving authority and will of God, not a fidelity that turns its back on that will.

## V. Genesis 19

**Assertion “The problem in Sodom was not homosexuality, but hospitality.”**

A. While this text doesn’t address gay marriage directly, it is often pointed to in an attempt to show that the sin God judges in Sodom was not homosexual activity, but the lack of hospitality. As the prophet Ezekiel reflects on the happenings in Sodom, it is argued, he is accusing the inhabitants of Sodom of having failed to help the poor and needy (Ezek. 16:49). And yet, in 16:50, he identifies the fact that they were involved in “detestable things.” Not only is the word “detestable things” the word used in Leviticus 18:22 to describe a man who lies with man, but it is also listed separately by Ezekiel in chapter 18:12 as something separate and distinct from oppressing the poor and needy.

B. In the text of Genesis 19 itself, the word “to know” (v. 5), can mean “to become acquainted with.” However, it is not used that way in the immediate, surrounding context in Genesis. Instead, it is used in a sexual sense, “to lay with” (cf. 4:1, 17, 25; 19:8; 24:16; 38:26). Thus, it is not surprising that the NT commentary on this Sodom text, Jude 7, states in no uncertain terms that the primary sin of Sodom was sexual, calling it “perversion.” Without question, failing to show hospitality to the poor and needy is a horrible offense. It just wasn’t the only offense in Sodom.

## VI. Slavery and the Subordination of Women

**Assertion: “The Bible was used in the past to justify slavery and the subordination of women, and we know both were wrong. It will be proved to be wrong in this case as well.”**

A. Certainly, the church has used the Bible to justify horrible social practices. But when rightly understood we can see that Paul encourages a slave owner to set his slave free (Philemon), and he exhorts masters to treat their slaves as God treats them (Col. 4:1). Women are found to be in leadership positions, in both testaments (e.g., Judges 5; Romans 16:1). Both Paul and Jesus can be seen to be sowing the seeds for a massive overturn of the social structure that allowed for freedom from oppression for both slaves and women.

B. However, regarding homosexual behavior, none of the texts having to do with such behavior affirm it, *in any way*. Their witness is consistent, as is the overall teaching of the Bible as to the living out of our God-given sexuality. Our sexual life is to find its right fulfillment within a heterosexual, marriage relationship.

### **Conclusion:**

If the authority of God's word does not affirm homosexual relationships of any kind, how does that same authority call us to respond to a person who struggles in this area?

1. Certainly, we are not to oppress them with condemnation! Worth observing is that Paul, in his letter to the Romans, actually performs what we might call a "homiletical sting operation." After he highlights homosexual activity in chapter one as idolatry, he follows in 2:1 with these words: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." All the ungodly behavior mentioned in chapter one stands. But just as ungodly is self-righteous judgment. As Paul will go on to declare in chapter three, all of us have fallen short of the glory of God, and are in need of his grace. We must recognize that all of us are slaves to sin, but still accountable to God's judgment of our actions. That terrible Catch-22 is the dilemma from which God, through Christ, saves us.

2. Once we have been so rescued, what does it mean to put to death those things that belong to our earthly (sinful) nature, such that the image of God is being renewed within us (Col. 3)? What does it mean to have Jesus call us to deny ourselves and follow him (Mark 8:34)? What does it mean to live and not have every desire fulfilled? How can we experience the cleansing, transforming power of the Holy Spirit, unless we place ourselves at his disposal (1 Cor. 6:9-11)? How are we to know that God's "grace is sufficient" (2 Cor. 12:9), unless we seek to live according to his will? In this regard, I want to emphasize that homosexuality is NOT worse than any of the other sins we might struggle with. All of us must surrender to the lordship of Christ. Whether we struggle with the practice of our sexuality, or with materialism, or with kindness, all of us are in need of God's mercy and grace.

3. We are eschatological (looking to the end time) people. That is, the Christian community lives in a time of tension between the "already" and "not yet" aspects of the Kingdom of God. Already, we have the forgiveness of Christ and the joy of the Holy Spirit. But not yet do we experience the fullness of our redemption. Though set free from the penalty of sin, we still struggle with the power of sin, and will continue to struggle with all of our disorders, until we reach our heavenly existence.

4. To some, the Spirit will bring the gift of healing and the reordering of their sexual life (1 Cor. 6:9-11). To others, resting in the sufficiency of God's grace will be the call. Lives of freedom, joy, and service are possible without sexual activity. To think otherwise is to turn our sexuality into idolatry. Some (both homosexual and heterosexual) will need to practice abstinence out of love for God, leaning on the power of the Holy Spirit. The celibate life is clearly commended as a way of faithfulness (Matt. 19:10-12). A hard road indeed, but what a wonderful way to glorify God!

5. May we who are not called to struggle with the issue of homosexuality offer our support, respect, and care to those who find themselves in this difficult battle. May we protect them from harassment, prejudice, and discrimination in areas such as housing, employment, and education. And may we lovingly encourage these men and women to live under the authority of the word of God, and in the power of the Spirit whom God has given to all who bank their hope on him.