

Food For Thought Article: ‘The Marriage Debate’.



Introduction

This article is about my understanding of the nature of marriage from a Biblical, Christian point of view. It covers created sexuality (based on Genesis chapter 1 & 2), fallen sexuality, and redeemed sexuality, before moving on to consider what the arguments and beliefs are of those who agree with same sex civil partnerships and same sex marriages. I have grouped this last debate around five words which I think are key: Diversity – Identity – Equality – Love – Minority.

I then move on to look at four important passages of Scripture, two from the Old Testament and two from the New, which are interpreted in different ways according to which side of the debate you are on. I then ask this question: ‘Is love all we need, or do we need love in the context of law and truth?’

I am highlighting this ongoing debate now because it is being discussed this week in the General Synod of the Church of England and coverage will inevitably spill over into the media. In 2020, the C. of E. produced a library of resources under the heading of ‘Living in Love and Faith’ (LLF) which you can access at www.churchofengland.org/LLF if you wish.

I hope this article will help you to clarify what you believe (whichever side of the argument you are on), as the discussion and debate continues. I have included some questions/exercises for you to ponder, either alone or with others (preferably with others).

The only place to begin in this debate, I believe, is with Genesis chapters 1 & 2. This is because these chapters are rooted in divine revelation, not human opinion. Sexuality and marriage are divinely ordained, not culturally conditioned. As such they have permanent validity and universal authority.

Created Sexuality

Gen. 1:26-28 This is a general account of the creation of humankind as two sexually distinct beings, male and female. This account affirms the EQUALITY of the sexes. Both share in having the image of God, in being given joint responsibility for reproduction, and in having dominion over the earth. In God's sight, men and women are of equal value and status – they are joint heirs of God's grace and life in Christ.

Gen. 2:18-25 This is a particular account of creation which affirms the COMPLEMENTARITY of men and women.

~ In verse 18 we read that it was, 'Not good for the man [Adam] to be alone' and, 'I [God] will make a **helper suitable** for him.' 'Helper' is the Hebrew word 'ezer' which means to rescue, to save, to be strong, to protect. The helper is not, therefore, a weak, diminutive, subservient helper, but a strong, supportive help.

The word is used of God as a help e.g. 'We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.' (Ps. 33:20)

'Suitable' is the word 'K'neg'Do' which literally means 'someone who stands opposite, as a counterpart, in a corresponding and complementary way'. In verse 20: b we read, 'For Adam no **suitable helper** ('ezer 'K'neg'Do') was found' and so in verses 21&22 we read of God's provision to meet that need. Through divine surgery, under divine anaesthetic, a special work of creation was performed ~ the sexes became differentiated.

Application: Although men and women are equal and have similarities (Adam recognised the woman as being 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'), they are not identical. Being equal does not mean being identical. We are different from one another and we complement one another in the distinctive qualities of our own sexuality, spirituality, psychology and physiology.

8 Things About Biblical Marriage

1. Marriage is divinely ordained, something which God has designed, initiated and instituted.
2. It is a covenant relationship which both husband and wife commit to (Malachi 2:14&15; Prov. 2:16&17). A covenant is a solemn, binding agreement voluntarily entered into by each party out of benevolent goodwill towards the other party. It is NOT a contract. A contract is an agreement reached as the result of a two-sided/multi-sided negotiation.
3. It is an exclusive relationship between a 'man' and his 'wife'. Monogamy is God's intention.
4. It is a relationship which involves parental separation, 'a man will leave his father and mother' and involves the setting up of a new authority structure.
5. It is a relationship which involves permanent personal commitment. The man 'cleaves' to his wife and becomes 'united' with her. Faithfulness is at the heart of the covenant relationship.
6. It is a relationship which includes physical/sexual consummation, the man and his wife become 'one flesh'.
7. In the Old Testament, marriage is an expression/picture of the relationship between God and His people e.g. Jer. 31:32; Is. 54:5a.; Hosea 2:16-20.
8. In the New Testament, marriage is an illustration of the relationship between Christ, the Bridegroom and his Church, the Bride (Eph. 5:31&32).

It is important to note that in whatever context marriage is mentioned throughout the Bible, it is always between a 'man' and a 'woman' who are described as 'husband' and 'wife', or when used as an illustration of God's relationship with us, it is between God as 'husband' and his people as 'wife' or 'bride'.

Summary: *I reiterate that it is critical when discussing sexuality in general and marriage in particular, that we begin with Genesis chapters 1 & 2. Without the foundation of these chapters, anything we build will ultimately collapse. This is because these two chapters are rooted in divine revelation, not human opinion; they describe God's acts of creation and are not subject to change. They are divinely ordained and are not culturally conditioned. As such they have permanent validity and universal authority.*

Fallen Sexuality

It would be nice if we could remain in the delights of Genesis chapters 1 & 2 but the truth is that we now live in the reality of Genesis 3. Our sexuality is distorted and we all sin sexually – either in thought, word or deed. If we say we are not sexual sinners we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. This reality may make it difficult for us to accept/believe Genesis 1&2.

Some of the consequences of our fallen sexuality are: -

- **Painful feelings** which can include **guilt, frustration, defensiveness** e.g. where we have a strong moral viewpoint and are 'on guard' ready to defend our beliefs and attack anyone who disagrees; **anger** e.g. because we have been hurt and rejected in previous close relationships; **shame** and **embarrassment** because we think there is something inappropriate about ourselves which we need to hide; **fear** because we think we may be seduced, exploited, humiliated or abused; **blame** i.e. moving responsibility onto someone else.

We can see all of these in operation in Genesis chapter 3.

- **Inappropriate relationships.** Over the years I have counselled many church leaders who were having affairs with someone in their congregation. And I remember one young man who regularly went to church on Sunday and visited a prostitute on Monday.
- **A distortion of power and control in male/female relationships.** This, for me, is the saddest, most pernicious and destructive result of our fallen sexuality. The things that some women in particular have experienced at the hands of men are shocking. [I am aware that some men have also been abused by the women in their lives].

The domination, maltreatment and subjugation of women by men is due to fallen sexuality, not to the male/female equality and complementarity of creation. Sometimes Christian men have misused the Biblical concept of 'headship' as a pretext to be autocratic and oppressive towards their wives. But in many other religions and cultures, examples can be given of male/female inequality.

In Gandhi's autobiography he writes: 'A Hindu husband regards himself as lord and master of his wife, who must ever dance attendance upon him.'

(1)

In Sura 4:34 of the Qu'ran, entitled 'Women', we read: 'Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other..... As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them.' (2)

Another example of this distortion of power and control is seen in the pornographic industry, now a major symbol of Western decadence but spreading around the world. In this case, women are made the objects of male abuse and violence. It is no wonder that women and girls can no longer walk safely on our streets; there are men, fuelled by violent pornography, looking for opportunities to act out their shocking fantasies.

And it's not just men. I heard recently of one 12-year-old boy who attempted to strangle a girl in a sexual encounter because he thought that was a normal part of love-making.

'Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour' (1 Peter 4:8).

Redeemed Sexuality

To a certain extent, God has accommodated himself to our fallen sexuality by:

In the Old Testament: -

- Making coverings for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21)
- Setting boundaries around easy divorce (Deut. 24:1-4)
- Acknowledging the possibility of polygamy (Deut. 21:15-17)
- Allowing men to have concubines. A woman's status as a concubine was higher than a slave but lower than a wife. It was a way in which a woman could avoid prostitution and homelessness and could be provided for. Concubinage was obviously not part of God's original intention for marriage but because human relationships now involved sin, God made laws to protect vulnerable women from further oppression. Keturah was one of Abraham's concubines and bore him six sons (1 Chron. 1:32).
- Providing Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5&6). The fear of dying without the possibility of one's name living on through one's sons still causes anxiety in many cultures today. This practice is intended to alleviate that worry.

In the New Testament: -

- Redemption is through the blood of Christ and his sacrifice for us on the Cross. Although sexual sins may affect us, and others, at a more intensely personal level, (Paul says that the person 'who sins sexually sins against his/her own body' (1 Cor. 6:18), there is no sexual sin that is unforgiveable.
- Jesus' meeting with the woman taken in adultery is a key passage in understanding our response to those who have committed sexual sin (John 7:53-8:11). Here are some pointers: -
 1. We should avoid being unfair/biased. If the prosecutors in this case were keen to uphold the law, why didn't they also arrest the man caught in adultery?
 2. We should avoid hiding behind other people's opinions. It is safer to be part of a crowd and remain anonymous whereas God will personalise things and ask us if we are sexually sinless. Are we in a position to throw the first stone?
 3. The woman was the recipient of unexpected love from Jesus which saved her life.
 4. Jesus neither condemns her nor overlooks her self-destructive lifestyle. He accepts the sexual code of the Old Testament, but removes its penalty. A foreshadowing of what he would achieve for all of us on the Cross.

What Arguments Do Those Who Believe In Same Sex Civil Partnerships And Same Sex Marriages Use? What Influences Their Thinking And Beliefs?

One of the major influencers today is an appeal to **DIVERSITY**. This is evidenced in many aspects of our lives but especially in terms of our sexual orientation. Whereas God created Adam and Eve as heterosexuals, this binary male/female sexual orientation and attraction is seen today as being simplistic, imposed, restrictive and out-dated.

I saw a young woman the other day on T.V. who was an ambulance paramedic. She was looking forward to her upcoming lesbian marriage but had been visiting quite a number of elderly patients that day who were all either in heterosexual marriages, or had been widowed, after 50, 60 and even 70 years of marriage! The paramedic thought it was quite cute but rather old-fashioned; society had moved on.

But let me say, provocatively, that if you think there are only heterosexual, gay and lesbian sexual orientations, you are well out of touch! There are also people who identify as Abro, Ace, Aro/ace, Allo, Aro, Aromantic, Asexual, Bi, Demi, Grey, Pan, Queer etc. and the list keeps growing!

We have moved on, some would say down, since this 2008 American Psychological Association definition of sexual orientation as: - 'An enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and /or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes... the sexual orientation is usually discussed in terms of three categories: **heterosexual** (having emotional, romantic or sexual attractions to members of the other sex), **gay/lesbian** (having emotional, romantic or sexual attractions to members of one's own sex), and **bisexual** (having emotional, romantic or sexual attractions to both men and women).'

Today there are many more orientations and combinations. Diversity is king.

At this point I am reminded of a verse from Ecclesiastes in the Good New Bible which says: 'God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated' (Eccles. 7:29).

A second key word in this debate is **IDENTITY**. Those with a same sex orientation believe it is an essential part of their identity; who they truly are. And if they believe in God, they believe that God has made them the way they are and that this should be celebrated, sanctified even. They would say that our sexual orientation is fixed at birth and is immutable. It is a fact of how we were created in the womb, something over which we have no say, no choice.

For myself, I don't agree with this. It seems to me that God has designed us so that in the same way it takes say 12-16 years to reach full physical, sexual maturity, so our sexual orientation in relating to, and being intimate with, people of the same or opposite sex is a choice we make as we grow up, especially in our teenage years.

We now know that even the brain's development continues for many years after birth and how it develops is very dependent on events in the individual's life. Nurture and life experiences are as important as nature in determining our development and decision making. There is not a fixed

determinism here but a complex interplay between nature, circumstances, life experiences, culture, thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Dr David Eagleman, a neuroscientist, believes that everything we experience alters our brain structure, **meaning our identities aren't set in stone** – we're constantly rewiring our minds in tune with our environment (my emphasis). [The Brain: the Story of You by David Eagleman].

Hence the apostle Paul exhorts us to 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Rms. 12:2).

I believe that identity, including sexual identity, is the end product of a process of identification, a factor of who and what we identify with; it is not something which is fixed at birth. It might seem obvious, but none of us are born as adults; all of us are designed to undergo a long period of physiological and psychological development as a process before reaching maturity.

Question: In one sense there are no gay/lesbian/heterosexual people, only human beings made in the image of God. How central do you think a person's sexual orientation is in defining their identity?

Whilst looking at identity linked with sexual orientation, we also have to look at identity linked with gender identity. Gender identity is about how I view myself as male or female or both or neither. Gender identity can be the same as, or different from, the sex assigned at birth.

A transgender person is someone who thinks and feels that they belong to the opposite sex. Their gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth. They have a strong desire to assume the physical characteristics and express the gender role of the opposite sex. Some will choose to undergo hormone treatment.

I have in front of me as I write, a photograph of Ecuador's first transgender family (Sept. 2016). Let me introduce them to you: -

Holding the baby is Diane (born Luis). Diane has retained his male genitals but has had female hormone therapy, hence the breasts. He (Diane) is the mother.

Her partner is Fernando (born Maria). Fernando has retained her female sex organs but has had male hormone therapy. She gave birth to the baby and is the father.

Questions: Are all these different sexual orientations and gender identities conferring identity or confusing identity? Discuss.

As Christians, our identity is in Christ; he is the one we identify with. What advantages does having this identity confer on us as we live out our lives?

Another key word in this debate is **EQUALITY**.

In society in general, the argument is that those who have a same sex attraction must have the same rights in law as those with heterosexual attraction. In the Church in particular, those who have same sex attraction must have the same access to blessings and marriages in Church as heterosexual couples. Anything else is discriminatory ~ it infringes basic human rights.

Equal rights and anti-discrimination issues were the main drivers which led to the **Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act** which came into force in Great Britain in March 2014 and to the United States Supreme Court declaring same sex marriage legal in all states in June 2015. Some think we were very tardy in this regard ~ same sex marriages being legalised in Denmark as long ago as 1989.

As a separate issue, but worth mentioning here nevertheless, is that the Act in Great Britain came into force without any real mandate for this fundamental policy change and this re-defining of marriage. Although the Bill was passed in both Houses of Parliament, it was not in any party manifesto or mentioned in the Conservative-Lib Dem pact. There was no Green Paper or White Paper and it wasn't in any Queen's speech. It was all done quite secretly.

But in terms of same sex marriages being conducted in Churches, unless you agree with my understanding of what constitutes God's order for created sexuality and the institution of marriage according Genesis chapters 1 & 2, it is impossible, it seems to me, to refute their arguments for having equality in law.

Another key word in the debate is **LOVE**.

Those who advocate same sex marriage say, "Surely love is the most important thing here. Why should we deny those with a same sex orientation the possibility of having an intimate loving relationship which

includes sexual intimacy if they so desire?” And those who believe in God will say, “God is love, so He must be involved with, and approve of, our loving relationship.”

However, I would wish to point out that there are different kinds of loving relationships and different kinds of love. There is, for example, love for God, love between friends, love between parents and children and the special sexual love and desire expressed between husband and wife in genital intimacy, though I accept that some homosexual couples say, “Why should we be denied the pleasures of genital sex?”

But in the same way I am not expected to have a sexualised relationship with God, or sexual intimacy with fellow Christians, or with my next-door neighbour’s wife or with my children, neither am I allowed to have a sexually intimate relationship with someone of my own sex. Once we dispense with these God-given boundaries of love and affection then, I believe, warning bells should, and are, sounding.

I will be looking at some other passages from the Bible on this topic shortly but I am convinced that ***never once in the whole Bible do I find that God gives permission for same sex marriage or genital intimacy between people of the same sex.***

Sometimes I have heard gay-affirming Christians mention the relationship that David had with Jonathan (2 Sam 1:26). It is true that David and Jonathan had a very close relationship but there is no evidence whatsoever that it was sexual, rather it was a ‘sworn friendship’. They even made a covenant with each other but in no way was it a marriage covenant. Read about the nature of the covenant and its context in 1 Sam. Chapter 20.

It is true that they had a deep friendship love for each other, Jonathan ‘loved David as he loved himself’ and they even ‘kissed each other and wept together’. But again there is no evidence that they engaged in sexual intimacy with each other.

I have wept with, hugged and kissed some of my Christian brothers and sisters, but without any sexual intimacy. [5 times in the New Testament Christians are encouraged to ‘greet one another with a holy kiss’ and, as you know, the difference between a kiss and a holy kiss is about two minutes!]

After Jonathan had been killed, David's lament for him contains these words: "I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother (not lover); you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." (2 Sam. 1:26)

So it seems that David experienced a different kind and a different depth of love for Jonathan that he hadn't experienced with all of his female wives and concubines. But if we look at David's life overall, we can surely conclude that he was strongly heterosexual not homosexual.

Jesus, of course, is the supreme example of love for the same sex in his relationship with his 12, all male, apostles. But it was never sexual. We read of him, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love." (Jn. 13:1)

Questions: Do you think that one of the problems today is that we have confused God's self-sacrificial – agapao – love, with affectionate - phileo- love between friends, and sexual love – epithumeo? Have the boundaries between these different kinds and expressions of love, been lost? Discuss.

There is one other word that I want to introduce into the debate and that is **MINORITY**.

We live in a day and age in which minorities must be protected at all costs. Anyone who stands in the way of what minorities want, disagrees with what they believe, and says, or writes, anything that offends them, is going to be ostracised and vilified. So anyone who advocates only heterosexual marriage is automatically labelled as being 'homophobic'. This I object to, having spent years training as a counsellor with gay men and lesbian women and having counselled many gay men over the years, I have no fear of homosexuals. I see them as people made in the image of God who are struggling with their fallen sexuality as I do, but in a different way.

I am not saying that minorities should not be protected. Hate crimes, which gay men and women can be subject to, are shocking and can never be condoned. But it is also true that we now live in a victim culture in which everyone is hypersensitive to anything which can be interpreted as being hurtful, discriminatory, offensive and dismissive.

In the 2021 Census, which covered all those over 16 years of age who live in England and Wales, the question was asked for the first time, “What is your sexual orientation?” 1.54% said gay or lesbian; 1.51% said bisexual/pansexual; 0.06% said asexual and 0.03% said queer.

We could regard these numbers as quite small but we need to factor in that 7.5% of people i.e. 3,600,000, chose not to answer this question and we know that quite a considerable proportion of this group would identify as gay/lesbian etc. but find it difficult or impossible to make this known to others.

The trends, however, are noticeably upwards. In 2021, 402,000 people were in legally formalised same sex relationships, up from 104,942 in 2011.

To summarise this section then, we have 5 words which are key in this debate which we have to pay attention to: Diversity – Identity – Equality – Love – Minority.

Moving on. **I would now like to look, briefly, at 4 Bible passages, two from the Old Testament and two from the New, which are interpreted in different ways by those for and against in this debate.**

The first is Genesis 19:1-13 – Lot’s experience whilst living in the city of Sodom.

You will notice that I have only come to this passage now. It is never the place where I would begin in this debate. It is essential to begin at the beginning with Genesis chapters 1 & 2. Those who advocate same sex marriage often like to begin at Gen. 19 with their arguments, but that seems to me to be a strange place to begin. It’s like trying to introduce people to the delights of cooking by beginning with a talk about food poisoning!

In fact, gay theologians tend to be weak on Genesis 1 & 2. What they emphasise is that it is the covenant qualities of love, commitment, faithfulness etc. which are important in the relationship, not the gender issues. Anyway, back to Gen. 19. There are those who disagree with the translation of verse 5 NIV.... [All the men].... ‘called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us **so that we can have sex with them.**” They would say there is no need to translate the Hebrew

word 'yada' as 'have sex with them' but rather 'so that we can get acquainted with them' or, 'so that we can know who they are.'

The particular sin that Lot was guilty of, they say, was that he had invited two people into his home (angels appearing as men in this case) without conforming to the rules of hospitality. Their protestations were not to do with proposing homosexual intercourse but their concern over the violation of the laws of hospitality.

But there are problems with this interpretation. First of all, Lot says to the men: "No my friends. Don't do this wicked thing." If the men had just wanted to get to know the visitors socially and check out their credentials with regard to who they were, how could this be described as 'a wicked thing'? Then, Lot's offer of his two daughters to 'replace' the two men seems to indicate that there was a sexual element to this episode.

The next problem is that the verb 'yada' = 'to know' which is used in 19:5 is also used in 19:8 about Lot's daughters who had not 'known a man'/'slept with a man' i.e. they were virgins. To suggest that Lot's daughters had not known or been acquainted with any men socially before this event doesn't fit. 'Yada' here must mean 'know' in a sexual sense.

But those who advocate same sex relationships and marriage can object to this passage in another way. They say: "Yes, we accept that these men wanted homosexual sex with the visitors, but what is being condemned here is **violent gang homosexual rape**. This is a far cry from the loving, committed, monogamous same sex relationships that gay Christians are advocating today. The context, they believe, is completely different.

I think this observation has much more merit, but it is still a long way from saying that this passage, if it is condemning homosexual rape, in any way justifies or promotes same sex marriage and relationships. That would be to read into this passage what isn't there ~ eisegesis rather than exegesis.

The second scripture I would like to look at is Lev. 18:22, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" and 20:13 "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads."

First of all a couple of points generally about the laws in Leviticus. Some regard them as rather naïve and not applicable in our more sophisticated scientific society. Take the food laws in Leviticus chapter 11 and the long list of animals and birds which are not to be consumed. Is that good advice? I think it is, especially as we now know that Horseshoe bats (*Rhinolophus*) are a veritable repository for coronaviruses which jumped into civet cats, raccoon dogs, foxes, badgers and pangolins all of which could be bought live in some Chinese markets. The result was the coronavirus pandemic which swept the world.

Also, some of the health laws in Leviticus 13 are also way ahead of their time in offering protection against the transmission of disease. Perhaps God knows what He is doing and maybe the penalty for disobeying had to be severe in order to protect others!

But back to the debate in hand. Those people who advocate gay/lesbian relationships and same sex marriage in Leviticus 18 and 20 seek to interpret these verses along these lines: -

‘What is being described here as ‘detestable’ (‘abomination’ in the A.V.) is not same sex relations per se, or even male-male sexual relations, but a sexual form of the worship of false gods. It is sexual activity applied to the worship of pagan idols which is being condemned.’

Others would point out that commandments found in Hebrew scripture take one of two forms: **Apodictic commands** e.g. the Ten Commandments which are limited in number but absolute in scope, applying to all people in all situations for all time, and **Casuistic commands** which are contextual, case-specific and which apply only to some groups of people in some situations for a limited time.

They say the ‘Holiness code’ of Leviticus, from which these verses are taken, is an example of casuistic commands, no longer relevant to us today. Their thinking is that these verses prohibit religious practices which have long since ceased, and have no relevance at all to loving, enduring, committed same sex relationships today.

However, there seem to be some problems, for me, with this interpretation. If you are going to class these same sex prohibitions as casuistic (case specific and temporary), are you going to do the same for the other prohibitions, which are alongside these, and forbid child

sacrifice, incest, injustice, spiritualism, adultery and sex with animals? Are these also casuistic commands (temporary prohibitions and only to be applied in the context of false worship) which have no relevance today. I think not.

The emphasis in the whole of the book of Leviticus is on the people of God being different and distinctive from those around them and not engaging with these practices at any time and under all circumstances.

The laws are given for the benefit of God's people and the overall message of Leviticus is: "Be holy (separate) because I, the Lord your God, am Holy" (Lev 19:2). "Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord who makes you holy" (Lev. 20:7).

Unfortunately, some who advocate same sex relationships want to leave most, if not all, of the Old Testament laws behind. Hence Matthew Vines writes, "Once our Saviour has come, we no longer need the law. We could compare it to the way drivers no longer need road signs once they arrive at a destination." And, "Today's debate takes place in a context far removed from the setting of Leviticus and its prohibitions, **a law code that has never applied to Christians.**" (3) (My emphasis)

I do not believe this to be true. Jesus said he hadn't come to abolish the law, rather that it should still be taught (Mt. 5:17-20).

Once we dispense with the framework of law, anything goes, often in the name of love. I will mention at the end of this piece how love can only truly function in the context, and within the boundaries, of God's law.

The third passage of scripture to consider is Paul's statement in his letter to the Romans in 1:24-27.

Paul argues that when people continuously give up on God and worship the creation rather than the Creator, eventually God gives up on them. What follows first of all, as a result of this abandonment, is that 'shameful lusts' lead to 'unnatural' sexual relationships.

"God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another." (Rms. 1:26&27 - NIV)

But what does ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ mean? A gay/lesbian person will tell you that for them, their desire for someone of the same sex is entirely ‘natural’. It ‘feels right’ for them and enables them to ‘find themselves’ and ‘be who they are’.

But I would say that what Paul means by ‘natural’ is how God created us ‘in the beginning’. God has established a norm for sex and marriage by creation. ‘Natural relations’ are surely those which are in accordance with the intention and purposes of the Creator in creating us male and female. So I would understand these verses in relation to the divine institution of marriage. It is because heterosexual monogamy was established by God in creation that I understand homosexual and lesbian ‘marriage’ to be incompatible with God’s created order and therefore displeasing to him; ‘unnatural’ rather than ‘natural’.

Of course, it isn’t just over the issue of same sex marriage that this reasoning applies. As a married heterosexual male myself, I could feel it was ‘natural’ for me to have a sexual relationship with my next-door neighbour’s wife, but that too would be displeasing to God because it departs from his expressed will.

But one of the ways Matthew Vines, and other gay affirming writers, get round this interpretation, is by saying that what Paul is actually speaking against here is homosexual and lesbian acts committed by heterosexuals!

Because of excessive lust, heterosexuals were also engaging in same sex genital intimacy with members of their own sex. Vines says it is this lack of control which is being condemned by Paul ~ ‘excess’ as opposed to ‘moderation’. For me, this is yet another example of eisegesis (reading into scripture what isn’t there) rather than exegesis (bringing out what is there in a way which is consistent with other scriptures).

The fourth scripture to consider is in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians where he writes,

“Don’t you realise that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don’t fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes (‘malakoi’), or practice homosexuality (‘arsenokoitai’), or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people – none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.” (1 Cor 6:9-10, NLT)

Although the word ‘malakoi’ literally means ‘soft to the touch’ and is translated ‘effeminate’ in the A.V., it doesn’t necessarily describe sexual behaviour, despite the NLT version rendering it as ‘male prostitute’. However, the word ‘arsenokoitai’, literally ‘male in a bed’, definitely does describe homosexual practice.

However, Matthew Vines again gets round this plain understanding of the word ‘arsenokoitai’ by understanding Paul’s prohibition as applying **only** to sex with adolescent boys, prostitution and sex between masters and slaves. Again, he maintains, this has nothing to do with present day committed, loving gay relationships.

Summary of these 4 passages from scripture: -

Those who advocate same sex marriage and same sex relationships involving sexual intimacy, argue that Christian rejection of homosexual practices rests on what they regard as a few isolated and obscure proof texts (I have looked at four of the main ones here), which, they say, are actually denouncing gang rape, idolatry and lustful promiscuity, not gay/lesbian couples in committed, monogamous, loving relationships today.

Gay theology says that the Church must change its teaching (doctrine) on this issue for the enlightened times in which we live.

Those on the other side of the debate, myself included, would always want to begin, not with the four scriptures I’ve just looked at (which we would see as speaking against gay/lesbian practice), but with the positive teaching in Genesis chapters 1 & 2 about human sexuality and heterosexual marriage. **Negative** prohibitions of homosexual practices make sense only in the context of the **positive** teaching in Genesis 1 & 2.

It is because homosexual partnerships are incompatible with God’s created order (not primarily because of gang rape, idolatry, lustful promiscuity etc.), that they are forbidden in the Bible. Heterosexual monogamy was established by creation, not by culture, and therefore its validity is both permanent and universal.

Is Love All We Need, Or Do We Also Need Law And Truth?

I have heard those who conduct same sex marriages say that ‘Love is the **only** legitimate basis for marriage.’ (My emphasis)

But surely God wants to hold love, law and truth together. Love alone can never be the sole criterion on which to build morality and the expression of our sexuality.

Gay theology often appeals to the words of Jesus when he summarised the law as being love for God and loving your neighbour as yourself. However, in order to be acceptable to God, love has to be in line with the commandments of God, with the truth of his word.

Jesus said, 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love....' (Jn. 15:10). And John writes, 'this is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands' (1 Jn. 5:2).

Exercise: Read 2 John (it won't take you long!) and underline the words 'truth', 'love' and 'command' and see how he keeps them together. Alas, many today have sacrificed 'truth' and 'command' on the altar of a misunderstood 'love'.

Surely the truth is that there are no commandments at all in the Bible, from God or Jesus, that sanction or in any way allow same sex marriage or same sex genital intimacy.

Once, when Jesus was asked about the abuse of divorce laws, he didn't say, 'Well, as long as it's done in a loving way, you can dismiss your wife for burning your toast and take your love to someone else.' No, he said, 'Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female. 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' (Mt. 19:4-6). In other words, he went back to creation in Gen. 1&2.

He then goes on to say, 'What God has joined together, let man not separate'. In essence he is saying, 'Don't interfere with that which God has ordained at creation.'

Sometimes those in favour of same sex relationships point out that Jesus didn't actually say anything on this issue and argue that his silence indicates approval. But I believe that if he had been asked about it he would have replied along the same lines as when asked about easy divorce i.e. he would have gone back to how God intended things to be 'in the beginning'.

Alas, for many years now, we have been pulling marriages apart. Yet, taken as a whole, we know that the bonds between a man and a woman in heterosexual marriage are stronger than if the couple is just living together, and that the weakest bonds of all are between same sex couples, as evidenced by the statistics.

Finally, Some Pastoral Considerations.

It is when we come into contact with gay/lesbian people personally that our theology and understanding may be especially challenged. People often say to me, 'Well I know this gay individual or couple and it seems God is really using them. If God is not in favour of their lifestyle, then why is he blessing their life and ministry?'

The reality, however, is that God can and does use anyone he chooses. The fact that God uses a person does not necessarily mean that he approves of them or what they are doing. It is true that gay/lesbian Christians can be as honest, creative, courageous, loving, gentle, spiritual, and used by God as straight Christians are, and as sinful. All of us, together, are sinners in need of God's continuing grace, mercy, cleansing and forgiveness.

So I believe that gay/lesbian Christians should be able to find a place within the Church. We add to their pain when we misunderstand them, exclude them and treat them as the lepers of our day. This is not honouring to God and causes much pain and discouragement. So let's talk to one another, try to understand one another, agree where we can and disagree in love where we have different views of where the truth is to be found.

George Irving – Feb. 2023

- (1) Gandhi: An autobiography, (1949; Jonathan Cape, 1966), p. 155
- (2) The Koran translated by N. J. Dawood (Penguin, 1956), p.370
- (3) Vines, Matthew: 'God and the Gay Christian', (Convergent Books, 2014). See chapter 5, 'The Abominations of Leviticus'.

See also: Allberry, Sam: 'Is God anti-gay?' ((The Good Book Co., 2015).

Shaw, Ed: 'Same-sex Attraction & the Church' (IVP Books, 2015).