

Gay Marriage

Why the debate?

How should the church
respond?



This booklet was produced as a follow up to an evening discussion group at Poynton Baptist Church. It is designed to cover some of the aspects discussed in more detail, particularly the reasons why not all Christians are opposed to same sex relationships. It is not intended to be the last word; nor does it claim to be a detailed study. The language reflects the spread of opinion within the church where, perhaps, more members are instinctively cautious and fewer intentionally affirming.

It is not a statement of what the church nor its leaders necessarily believe, but a resource to help church members think about the issues for themselves.

We have made it into a booklet in the hope that it will be of use to others. Our hope is that followers of Jesus can walk with love, integrity and Christlikeness as they respond to the current debate.

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The idea Christians might disagree about the place of 'Gay Marriage' in church and society may seem strange. Although homosexuality has become socially acceptable over the last 20-30 years, surely what Christians believe has remained constant? This booklet sets out the issues to help understand the debate and show why Christians differ.

We will consider this in four parts.

First, what does Scripture say about homosexuality in general?

Second, what constitutes marriage from a Christian perspective?

Third, what places is there in church life for those with same-sex attractions?

Fourth, how do we apply these to the current debate about 'Gay Marriage'?

1. What does Scripture say?

Often Christians feel either 'the Bible is very negative about homosexuality' or 'the Bible has nothing to say about faithful same sex relationships'. This is because there are only a few verses that directly mention homosexuality. So let's look at the key verses used in the debate:

From the Old Testament

Genesis 19:1-11.

Whilst the city of Sodom is regularly mentioned the question for the reader is, "What is the sin of Sodom?"

In v4 it was every man who was involved and the threat was a social sin not simply an individual act. As the story unfolds Lot doesn't exactly show moral fibre in offering his daughters! The context of chapters 18 & 19 is also one of hospitality. As the rest of Scripture unfolds it is this social aspect which is condemned rather any sexual component. (Ezekiel 16v49, Matthew 10v15). A similar situation also occurs in Judges 19 v16-28

Leviticus 18:22

Again the question is what is being condemned? Then, why and how (if at all) does it apply to us today?

The context for this and for the similar passage in Lev 20:13 is the command for holiness. God calls Israel to be different to other nations especially the Canaanites whose rituals appear to have included child sacrifice, homosexual sex and bestiality. However, the application to us is more difficult. For example

the law goes on in Leviticus 19:19 to talk about clothes made of different fabrics (which we generally ignore today). So how do we decide which elements to follow, which laws apply to us today and which are part of an OT law that doesn't directly apply to Christians?

Other Old Testament references include Deuteronomy 23:17-18, 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46 and 2 Kings 23:7 that all refer to cult prostitution.

From the New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament we see that in all the comments Jesus makes about sexual sin, he never makes any comment about homosexuality.

Romans 1:16-32.

Paul's aim in this passage is to show how fallen humanity has rebelled against the creator; showing their unrighteousness in the face of God's righteousness. Paul uses standard Hellenistic / Jewish cultural descriptions and categories and cites homosexuality as an example of distortion from God's plan, of the fallen condition of the world; not because it is any worse than other sin. The debate over this verse has centred around two questions. First, the question of cultural context. Paul uses homosexuality because it was a standard Jewish example, he is mounting a sting operation to set up his Jewish hearers for ch2 v1. Would Paul therefore say the same thing to us? Second, Paul talks about people exchanging natural for unnatural desires. Yet many Gay and Lesbian people say they are being natural to themselves, they haven't exchanged anything.

1 Corinthians 6:9-12 (and 5:1,9-13)

Paul's main argument here is to contrast the Christians' old way of life with the new life they have in Christ; homosexuality was not the key thrust of Paul's argument. Greek culture was reputed to be promiscuous. Hence Paul's references to adultery as well as homosexuality. The two words used here are "malakoi" – literally "soft", a term similar to "rent boy" in our culture and "arsenokoitai" – a compound word made up of male and intercourse. This could refer to those who use male prostitutes or could refer to homosexuality more generally. Although it is clear that Paul is against prostitution and promiscuity do these verses prohibit loving, faithful, homosexual relationships?

1 Timothy 1:8-11

Here again the word used is “arsenokoitai”. So the question is what sort of things are being condemned? The NIV simply translates this as perversion.

Paul may be basing his arguments from the verses in Leviticus. These rejected homosexuality because it was part of the cultic practices of Israel’s neighbours and enemies. Writing to churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome, which had significant centres of temple worship, he recognised the need for people to resist involvement in same sex practices because of the association with pagan cults. His concern for holiness arose because this temple worship indulged in sexual licentiousness and depravity; with male prostitution and idolatry. So perhaps Paul was arguing against these sexual expressions not the behaviour of people who were only attracted to the same sex and in committed relationships. [If that feels an odd argument remember a similar line of reasoning is used to suggest 1 Tim 2:12 was a specific prohibition against women teaching in Ephesus and not a universal ban]

Jude 5-7

These verses are part of a section about false teachers. Jude gives examples of ungodliness that are subject to judgement.

1. Israel’s lack of faith.
2. The angels of Gen 6:1-4 who left heaven to engage in sexual union with humans
3. Sodom and Gomorrah who “in the same manner, indulged in sexual immorality and went after other flesh” by wanting sex with the visiting angels.

This is a crescendo of judgement against false teachers, not homosexuality

Alongside the verses that specifically mention homosexuality, we should also consider God’s original intentions for humankind.

Genesis ch1 & 2.

God’s plan for men and women was for marriage. This was the appropriate place for sexual expression and becoming ‘one flesh’. From this, Christians have argued that all other sexual expression falls short of God’s plan including: homosexuality, cohabitation, casual sex etc. Though we must not confuse the

'norm' with the 'ideal' (which would suggest that everyone not in heterosexual marriage is somehow less than God wants) it was to be the general pattern.

Questions to think through

In the light of these Scriptures we should ask ourselves four questions.

1. What forms of homosexuality does Scripture condemn?
2. Is there a place for loving, committed, faithful, homosexual partnerships?
3. Are attempts to understand the culture and background of verses simply ways of trying to get around what they say?
4. How would you respond to someone who argues that these verses are cultural and not directly relevant to our situation today?

2. What constitutes marriage from a Christian perspective?

Marriage plays a key role in the Bible from the beginning of creation.

As we saw from Genesis 2, marriage was part of God's plan for creation. As the Old Testament unfolds there are a variety of laws about who it is permissible to marry and in what circumstances. Nevertheless, there seem to be common threads that have developed into the patterns of marriage we recognise today.

1. Marriage involves sexual union. This has been particularly important to the Roman Catholic Church who understand from Genesis 1 and 2 that this is about sex and the potential for procreation (hence their view that contraception is wrong because it stops sex having the potential for new life).
2. Marriage is a covenant relationship before God (see Malachi 2:14). 'Leaving and cleaving' is life altering and cannot simply be undone; it is not a contract to be torn up if one partner doesn't like it or want to keep it.
3. Marriage involves public recognition and acceptance. Whilst the Bible gives examples of weddings it doesn't set out what a marriage service looks like. Marriage is set in context of families and wider society not just an arrangement between two individuals. It is not just about sexual activity but some form of public declaration of intent. Genesis speaks of a man leaving his father and mother; marriage changing wider family relationships through the creation of a new family. Many of the weddings recorded in Scripture were also marked with some form of feast.

Jesus on Marriage:

Matthew 19:

Jesus' teaching on marriage (for example Matthew 19 v 1-11) uses Genesis to draw on God's original intention for marriage. His presumption is that the choice is between marriage and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. However, elsewhere, he also suggests that marriage is an aspect of creation not continued in heaven (Mark 12:25).

In considering Christian marriage we need to be alert to modern influences. Some of us grew up with the idea of a perfect family consisting of working Father, stay at home Mother and children. This is an idea peculiar to the twentieth century. Historically marriages were part of a wider social framework and extended family with an emphasis on survival. Today we put much more emphasis on happiness, intimacy and love between the couple.

We should also reflect on the way Scripture has much to say about divorce. Yet we give relatively little attention to this in comparison with gay relationships. We have grown accustomed to divorce and remarriage.

3. What place is there in church life for those with same sex attraction?

Traditional approaches to homosexuality have been criticised for two things:

Misunderstanding Scripture:

The charge is that the church has it wrong in the same way the church was wrong about slavery and women in ministry.

Inevitably our reading of the Bible is coloured by our own assumptions, experiences and the society we are part of. We should always be alert to the charge that we have missed the point. Nevertheless, with both slavery and women in ministry changes have come about because people pointed to Scriptures that supported a new way of reading the Bible. This is harder to do in the case of same sex attraction but is a reminder to listen carefully to the Bible and to engage in the debate with humility.

Being homophobic:

The charge is that Christians treat homosexuals like second-class citizens; denying them the chance for fulfilment. In addition the church is accused of treating homosexual sin as worse than heterosexual or other sins.

As we consider these points we should remember the Bible nowhere suggests that sexual gratification is a right (indeed the notion of sexual orientation is a very modern idea). Although the situation for a gay person is different, the church has always believed in the value of celibacy and recognised that not everyone who wants to actually gets married.

If we have been, or are, homophobic then we need to repent. Jesus took a lead in identifying with those on the margins of society; particularly people others thought were sinners. We should follow his example and love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Pastorally it is worth noting that if we are heterosexual these questions are more abstract, if we are homosexual then they are intensely personal and the least that we can do is treat people with grace and love; even if we ultimately disagree about the issue.

So what is there in Scripture that might support same sex-relationships?

Justice: Key principles in Jesus' ministry included offering justice, inclusion and reconciliation to all. This resonates with the picture we get of God in the Old Testament (eg: Jeremiah 9:24) who had a particular concern for the weak and forgotten (eg: Psalm 82:3). Perhaps this desire for justice includes ensuring those who are attracted to the same sex have equal rights, opportunities and potential in the church?

Inclusion: Jesus welcomed all, particularly those who were identified as sinners. Surely, Jesus would welcome those with same sex attraction and would never shut them out of fellowship? And if Jesus would welcome them, surely the church must follow suit. Whereas too often the church has stigmatised and excluded those who enter faithful same sex relationships. (Though welcome is not the same as agreement or acceptance).

David and Jonathan: In 1 Samuel 20 the two entered into a covenant relationship together because they loved each other (1 Sam 20:17). Whilst

there is nothing in the Bible to suggest this was a sexual relationship, could it provide some Biblical basis for acknowledging same sex relationships?

Paul's pragmatism: In 1 Corinthians 7v9 Paul suggests it is better to marry than burn with passion. Whilst he is advocating celibacy as preferable, he is realistic enough to recognise this is not a calling for everyone. Maybe we should apply the same argument to same sex relationships. It is best to be single and celibate, but where this is not possible, it is better to be in a committed loving relationship. It is also better to be in a permanent stable relationship than a promiscuous one. Casual and self-centred relationships don't reflect God's faithfulness and self-giving love and are not an option for Christians whatever their sexual orientation.

As we form our own opinions we should include three other factors:

Identity: Some of the pro-gay argument is based on the assumption that homosexuality is a key part of someone's identity. This is idolatry. My identity is primarily as a child of God not someone who is white, British etc.

Gender: Jesus points out (Luke 20 v35) that in the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. And in Galatians 3 v28 Paul notes that in Christ there is no longer male and female. Whilst these verses are not talking about homosexuality perhaps, they suggest that gender is not the biggest thing in the Kingdom of God.

Transformation: The church is not simply a place where we come to be comforted and indulged, but transformed by the power of God on the cross. It is not just about where we come from in life but what we are becoming in Christ. Jesus welcomed sinners, but didn't expect them to keep on sinning. We are called to focus on holiness and being holy, the challenge is working out what this means for sexual relationships.

4. How can we apply all this to the debate today?

In general, Christians have taken one of four positions in thinking about homosexuality (these categories are taken from Nigel Wright *New Baptists, New Agenda*):

1. **Rejecting / condemning.** Homosexuality is sinful, homosexual orientation is to be rejected; it undermines and erodes society and we need to take a stand against those openly homosexual.

2. **Rejecting / compassionate.** Homosexual acts are sinful but orientation is a flaw not a sin. We are all called to live Godly lives and this impacts each of us differently. For some it is a struggle with alcohol, for others honesty and for others sexual orientation.
3. **Qualified acceptance.** Ideally there would only be faithful, heterosexual marriage. Yet as we acknowledge with remarriage, or war; faithful homosexual relations may be OK or the least bad option.
4. **Full acceptance.** Sexual relationships should be evaluated on the basis of their unitive not procreational purpose (that is they bring a couple together rather than simply have the potential for making babies). Homosexual “marriage” expresses love, mutuality etc which are all good Christian virtues. It is a matter of compassion, love and justice that we should accept both.

The role of the state:

The current debate over ‘gay marriage’ has two elements to it. First, the degree to which it is appropriate to support and encourage homosexuality. Second, what marriage laws should, or should not, permit.

In looking at this first element we need to draw a distinction between the church and wider society. Whilst many Christians are uncomfortable with the church embracing homosexuality they would (should in my view) want the law to protect the rights of all citizens regardless of sexual orientation. Within this, some form of civil partnership legislation may be needed simply to provide legal protection for people (in housing, pension provision and so on).

Looking at the second is more complex. We have seen in our discussion of Christian marriage that there are elements (of worship and covenanting before God) which are hard for the state to legislate for. Since 1836 it has been possible to marry outside the Anglican church. At first marriage law assumed Christian norms, but as the twentieth century progressed this changed. Now there is an increasing difference between Christian marriage and marriage as defined by the state. With hindsight, we can see it wasn’t a great idea allowing the state to define marriage in the first place.

As the debate moves onto ‘gay marriage’ we see a problem with the government defining marriage so it no longer contains all the elements of

marriage. In addition, legislation might suggest the Government has a right to define how people worship and what churches should or should not do.

Conclusions

Questions of sexuality will not go away. Although as few as 1.5% of the population may be actually lesbian, gay or bi-sexual we need to work through how far the church should go in accepting homosexuality. How can we be faithful to Scripture combining a passion for holiness in sexual relationships, marriage and commitment with an enthusiasm for justice and inclusion?

When we take our Christian principles and apply them to wider society we know not everyone shares our Christian faith. Because we believe faith in Jesus is something chosen, not forced or coerced, we believe that the law should protect both Christians and non-Christians alike, heterosexual and homosexual without distinction. Furthermore, we might argue it is in society's interests to promote and support family life, but this is not the same as suggesting the state should define what marriage is.

Perhaps we might distinguish between civil partnership and 'gay marriage', arguing the former is appropriate for the state to provide (and even should be extended to heterosexual couples). The latter is not marriage as Christians would understand (and because it is based on religious beliefs and conducted as part of a worship service, it is not something the state should legislate for).

We may view 'gay marriage' as impossible, inappropriate or a matter of justice and equality. Whatever our views let us treat others with Christlike love.

Questions to think through

1. How should we treat homosexual members of our congregation? Do we expect them to manage their relationships any differently to heterosexual people? If so, why?
2. How might a church respond to a same sex couple who have adopted children?
3. Is the church in more danger of losing its moral purity over questions of human sexuality or being unwelcoming to people with same sex attraction?
4. Are there any circumstances when it might be right for a church fellowship to bless a civil partnership?

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Poynton Baptist Church

50 Park Lane

Poynton

SK12 1RE

Tel: 01625 859036

www.pbc.org.uk