



Responding biblically to same-sex relationships

A pressing dilemma facing the Church is our attitude towards same-sex attraction. Should churches either accept and affirm LGBTQ - Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, and Questioning – people, or maintain a 'love the sinner but hate the sin' approach?

Mainstream UK society has become increasingly more LGBTQ 'accepting'. Equality legislation has afforded the same rights to many same-sex attracted people¹, including Civil Partnerships² and equal marriage³. Self-identifying as gay no longer carries the same social stigma or economic consequence it once did for many.

There is now strong pressure for the Church to follow the example of other sectors, like education, the military, judiciary, and the health service, to conform to this changing social pattern, in both recognising and welcoming same-sex couples. Those outside the Church find it hard to understand why the Church can't simply *modernise* its beliefs. Consequently, the Church now finds itself marginalised and derided for its antiquated attitude to same-sex attraction. Are we on the wrong side of history? The Church's perceived negative attitude to same-sex attraction therefore presents a most significant barrier to mission and future church growth, particularly with younger generations.

But the Church is not like other sectors. It is not just a complex human structure; it is the Body of Christ with God the Son as its Head [Col.1:18]. Therefore, the Church must not simply conform to the pattern of this world [Rom.12:2]. Just because 'the world' says something is acceptable, doesn't mean to Go it *is* acceptable. Ultimately, the Church is answerable to God, not to society.

Of course, the flipside of this is that the Church must also be transformed by the *renewing* of its mind – continually. Then we will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will [Rom.12:2].

Whether or not to accept and equalise LGBTQ people is not a social justice question (or even a mission/ church growth question); it is first and foremost a Bible question. The question then becomes, so what does the Bible say about same-sex attraction and marriage?

Many Christians who oppose same-sex marriage today do so because they think that's what they are *supposed* to believe. They want to be faithful to God and the Bible, but rely on what others tell them the Bible says on the matter. (They haven't properly read, let alone studied, it for themselves). What if it turns out they are defending a misunderstanding? What if the Bible actually says more than they thought, and yet does *not* say what they heard it says?

Engaging with the Bible

The Bible is by far the most published and yet least read – and even less understood – book. It is the Spirit-inspired, unfolding story of God and his people. Through it, we trace a growing understanding and revelation of God through successive generations. Abraham may have been saved by faith [Heb.11:8-11] just as surely as was Paul and yet, coming after Christ, Paul's understanding of God had greater clarity and definition than Abraham's.

When asked by an expert in the Scriptures, Jesus replied, "*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*" [Lk.10:25-26]. Jesus was asking, what's your 'take' on faith? Jesus appreciated that Scripture has to be understood, not just read. And that requires interpretation.

The Scriptures might not change, but sometimes our interpretation of them does. The Bible may be 'infallible' to many Christians, but our interpretation or reading of it is not. Church history reveals how interpretations have clarified over time.

For example, the Church once taught the sun and all other planets and moons rotated around the earth. Joshua 10.13, 1 Chronicles 16.30, Psalms 19.4-6, 93:1, 96.10, 104:5, 119.90 and Ecclesiastes 1:5 were quoted as evidence. But then Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) challenged this flawed interpretation, proving the earth rotated around the sun. Galileo was charged with heresy. But he was right! The Scriptures didn't change, but our interpretation of them did.

Some Christians used the Bible to justify slavery as God-designed. They cited Philemon, 1 Corinthians 7:21-24, Genesis 9:20-25, and Titus 2:9. Fortunately, other Christians, like Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) and William Wilberforce (1759-1833), challenged this evil and flawed interpretation. The Scriptures didn't change, but our interpretation of them did.

Other Christians supported apartheid in South Africa and racial segregation in the United States of America. They claimed God had ordained the supremacy of white people over all others, quoting Genesis 1; Genesis 11, Acts 2:5-11; Acts 17:26; Romans 13:1-7. Now we look back with profound shame. The Scriptures didn't change, but our interpretation of them did.

Fifty years ago, many churches followed a 'male only' understanding of leadership. A decreasing minority still do. After all, didn't Apostle Paul say, "*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."* [1 Tim.2:12]? And that "*the women should keep silent in the churches.*" [1 Cor.14:34]. And yet, *most* Christians today celebrate the leadership of women. The Scriptures haven't changed, but our interpretation has.

The Bible might not change, but our understanding or interpretation of it sometimes does. That's maybe why "*the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" [Heb 4:12].

Just as our 'reading' of the Bible has changed on issues of race, slavery, and women's ministry (as well as, contraception, divorce and remarriage etc etc), will future Christians look back with the same incredulity on our generation's condemnation of same-sex attraction?

So, what does the Bible say?

The Bible doesn't say as much about same sex-attraction as might be assumed from the volume of debate. In all, there are *seven* separate references made to homosexuality: four in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament. That's just under 0.0002% of its content.

As an aside, the words 'homosexual' and 'homosexuality' didn't appear in any English translation of the Bible until *after* the 1946 Revised Standard Version⁴. That's *not* to suggest earlier translators didn't use substitute descriptions or words (they did), but the apparently clear and unambiguous language that some modern readers cite with such certainty was absent before then.

Let's examine those seven texts so see what they do – and don't – teach us.

'Proof text' #1: Genesis 19: 1-5

"The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth and said, "My lords, please turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the town square." But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them."

The chilling account of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis epitomises for many God's wrath towards same-sex attracted people. Just look what happened. God judged and destroyed two whole cities, killing virtually all inhabitants on account of homosexual sin.

Yet, the text reveals a different story to the caricature. Even *before* sending the two angels, and what happened to them, God had already decided to punish Sodom [Gen.13:13; 18:17]. The King James Version is coy: "Bring them out unto us, that we may *know* them." The New International Version is more upfront: "Bring them out to us so that we can have *sex* with them." But it's The Living Bible that is most direct: "Bring out those men to us so we can *rape* them." The application of this story changes the instant we realise it is *not* about same-sex attraction, but about rape; on this occasion, male rape – male gang rape⁵.

Far from being judgmental, Abraham interceded on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot, Abraham's nephew, was providing all-important hospitality to two guests, angels sent by God. On discovering their presence, a local mob demanded that Lot hand his male guests over to be gang-raped by the male mob.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not a judgment on two consenting members of the same gender having a faithful, life-long, committed, sexual relationship. The sin was *rape* - on this occasion, men raping men, gang rape. The mob wasn't expressing their love for or attraction to the two strangers, rather their desire to humiliate and break the human spirit. Rape and all forms of sexual violence are abhorrent. We shouldn't be surprised that God was angry.

The travesty is that sexual violence against women⁶, as well as against men, has been condoned in many cultures and centuries (including our own). To compute that homosexual sex is inherently sinful because men raped men, we would also have to say that heterosexual sex is equally sinful because men rape women, just as David's sin of adultery (heterosexual unfaithful sex) with Bathsheba does not make all heterosexual expressions sinful.

Many Jewish commentators regard the sin of Sodom to be 'failing to practise hospitality'. Abram and Sarai [Gen.18] and then Lot welcomed and provided for their strangers or angels [Gen.19], whereas the mob sought to humiliate and attack them. The Prophet Ezekiel spoke

the word of the Lord, declaring, “*Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me.*” [Ezek.16:49-50]. It appears God didn’t think the sin was consenting, monogamous, faithful same-sex relationships.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a chilling reminder that sexual violence has been used to brutalise women and men for centuries. It was then – as now – totally abhorrent to God.

What did the Law say?

For most Christians, Leviticus is not their ‘go-to’ book of the Bible. Its eclectic and, at times, obscure instructions can seem irrelevant.

That is, until issues of human sexuality arise.

Then, suddenly, Leviticus is championed for providing two of the seven verses in the Bible that appear to condemn homosexuality. After all, didn’t Jesus declare “*I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil them?*” [Mt.5:17-20].

Except, Jesus was not calling for a return to a golden era of living by the *Law*. Instead, Jesus was radically reframing the Law, frequently saying, “*You have heard that it was said.. but I tell you..*”. Jesus was calling people back into *relationship* with God, not conformity to a legal code.

To engage with the whole of Scripture, we cannot ignore Leviticus. Whilst others at the time thought the forces of nature or ‘gods’ were distant, unknowable and aloof, the Book of Leviticus was a powerful statement that Yahweh, the One God, wants relationship with us. And that what we do affects our relationships with each other and ultimately with God. So, Leviticus has a profoundly important message⁷. We just need to be consistent in how we apply it.

If we condemn homosexuality, we must also condemn the wearing of polyester shirts (mixing fibres was strictly forbidden [Lv.19:19]); ‘hipsters’ with ‘bed-head’ hair [Lv.10:6], who wear ripped jeans [Lv.10:6], and have trimmed beards [Lv.19:27] and tattoos [Lv.19:28]. Leviticus declares all of these wrong. *And some!* We can’t say, *this* law applies today, but *that* law doesn’t, otherwise we’d risk relying on our own *likes* and *dislikes*, our own prejudices.

Conversely, there are many laws in Leviticus that we are slow to acknowledge because they are so challenging. For example, Leviticus 25:35-37 declares,

“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so that they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit.”

Why are some laws considered redundant, but others considered still relevant? Who decides? And on what basis? Could it be humanity has a tendency to declare as wrong (‘sin’) those things it sees in others that don’t apply to them?

When Leviticus appears to include two references to homosexuality, we mustn’t *assume* that what we in Twenty First Century West understand by homosexuality is what the Scripture contributors and their Bible translators meant. Let’s look at the two verses.

'Proof text' #2: Leviticus 18:22

“Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”

Leviticus 18 deals with a detailed and wide-ranging list of wrong unlawful practices, including:

- sex with a close family member (incest) [Lv.18:6-9];
- sex with a child (child abuse) [Lv.18:9-11];
- sex with a wider family member (adultery) [Lv.18:12-16];
- sex with more than one woman at the same time (group sex) [Lv.18:17]
- sex with more than one wife (bigamy) [Lv.18:18-20];
- child sacrifice (ritual abuse & infanticide) [Lv.18:21]
- sex between two men (homosexuality) [Lv.18:22];
- sex with an animal (bestiality) [Lv.18:23]

If this was to be taken literally, then:

1. Why does it only write from a *man's* perspective? Why would sex between two men be 'detestable' but sex between two women not be?
2. Why were some 'Old Testament' individuals not condemned for breaking this Levitical code? For example, Jacob married his wife's sister [Gen.29]; Abraham married his half-sister [Gen.20:12]; Amram married his Aunt Jochebed [Ex.6:20]. Some argue it was because the Law was not given to Moses until later (True, but that suggests there is a gradual progression of understanding within the Bible of what is right and wrong. This process was only completed by Christ, hence why He would frequently say of the Law, "You have heard that it was said.. But I tell you..")
3. Why does it not say sex between a father and his daughter is also wrong? Some argue it was because it was so obvious, it didn't need saying. (But surely "Don't have sex with your ox" would have been even more obvious?!) Others say, it was originally included but omitted in error by scribes. (But, if they are saying the text is not complete, then what else needs correcting?) To be consistent, anyone and everyone who 'committed' any of the above, would have to be "cut off from their people" [Lv.18:29].
4. There is debate about what v.22 is referring to:
 - Same-sex attraction (orientation)?
 - Same-sex sexually intimate activity?
 - Same-sex penetrative (anal) sex?

What some modern-day translators refer to as "sexual relations with a man" [Lv.18:22] is probably better understood as warning against "sexual relations with a boy". It is condemning child abuse i.e. sex with a minor, a young boy. Remember, translating into English ancient Hebrew texts written thousands of years ago is not a precise science. The Ancient Hebrew-speakers didn't leave us Google Translate or the Oxford English-Ancient Hebrew Dictionary.

²¹ *Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.* ²² *Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.*

A better understanding is:

²¹ Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD. ²² Do not have sexual relations with a boy as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

Verses 21 and 22 are both condemning the same thing – child sacrifice and child abuse. Who doesn't condemn that? Chapter 18 begins and ends with an important challenge to live both differently and better than other societies. Consequently, whilst others may get drawn into incest, bigamy, child abuse and child sacrifice, God's people are to be different. In an age when we are having to face up to historic child abuse within the Church and other institutions, Leviticus 18 is a powerful and sobering call for us to live differently and better.

'Proof text' #3: Leviticus 20:13

"If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads."

If Leviticus 18 lists unlawful sexual *practices*, Leviticus 20 describes their *punishments*. As with Leviticus 18, Leviticus 20 starts by making clear the context is *child abuse* and child sacrifice (ritual abuse and infanticide) [Lv.20:1-5].

"Any Israelite or any foreigner residing in Israel who sacrifices any of his children to Molek is to be put to death."
Leviticus 20:1

It is to be death by stoning [Lv.20:2]. Moses then warns of the severe consequences for 'turning a blind eye' to such child abuse and child sacrifice [Lv.20:4-5]. There is to be no cover-up, no quietly transferring someone's ministry to another Region or Diocese.

If this verse [Lv.20:13] is to be both applied today and taken literally, then all men (again, no mention of women) who have a same-sex sexual relationship should not only be condemned, they should also be executed - stoned to death (a form of execution that relies on mob violence). Tragically, LGBT+ people have been persecuted and oppressed for all generations. In some 'tribal' areas of the world, LGBT+ people are still being stoned to death. Western society rightly condemns such barbarism. And yet, LGBT+ people also face violence and intimidation in the UK. It's not enough to say, "it's just a debate". It's literally 'life and death' for some. Intimidation and violence towards gay people - done in the name of God – is leading to higher rates of self-harm among gay people and shames both society and Church alike.

Of course, conservative Evangelicals (with the odd exceptions) are not calling for the death penalty; simply asserting that homosexual sex is wrong and to be condemned as sin. Curiously, by *not* calling for the death penalty, they are acknowledging that the Levitical text should *not* be taken literally. It requires interpretation!

Furthermore, if this verse [Lv.20:13] is to be applied today, then it's not just homosexual couples that must be stoned to death. To be consistent, so too must anyone who has ever cursed one of their parents [Lv.20:9] – no mention of provocation as an excuse! And any man *or woman* (so earlier omissions of women were not accidental?) who is a medium or spiritualist [Lv.20:27]. We'd need a lot more stones! Of course, no-one thinks we should do that.

Other reasons to stone people to death include, if a man is caught having sexual relations with an animal (bestiality) [Lv.20:15]. The animal (non-consenting victim), it says, must also be put to death. However, if a woman is said to be approaching an animal for sex, she and the animal must be stoned to death. How many times in a male-dominated and agricultural society must

this have been conveniently cited to perniciously and falsely accuse and conveniently put to death an innocent woman on the pretence she had gone *near* an animal 'obviously with a sexual intent'? Doesn't only God know the true motives of the heart?

Leviticus is a much misunderstood book with a profoundly important message today about the potential for relationship with God and the effects our behaviours can have on both each other and God. But Leviticus does not provide the clear condemnation of homosexual couples in a 'til death us do part' committed relationship that some claim it does.

'Proof text' #4: Judges 19:22-23

"While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, 'Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.' The owner of the house went outside and said to them, 'No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this outrageous thing.'"

If ever there was a chapter in the Bible that requires interpretation it is Judges 19. Read it now!

A rural priest (a Levite) was having a 'not-so-secret' *affair* with a woman⁸. After a while, the priest thought his *lover* was being unfaithful – to *him*. The priest was outraged! She left him and returned to her parent's home. Some translations say, far from being unfaithful to the priest, she was fearful of him⁹. Four months later the priest tried to get her back. On arrival at her parents' home, his ex-lover's father insisted the priest stay for one, then two, then three, and finally four nights. Whatever the father thought about the priest, he put aside in order to offer this stranger the all-important 'hospitality code'. Eventually the priest set-off for Jerusalem with his now reunited lover. And his servant. And his two donkeys. Getting dark, the servant suggested they stop the night in Jerusalem, then controlled by the Jebusites. Being full of 'people *not* like us', the priest kept going until the safety of Gibeah and 'people like us'. But 'the people like us' did not offer them any hospitality. They were left sitting in the town square.

Eventually an old man living in Gibeah, but who originated from the same rural area as the priest, invited them to stay with him. Again, that all-important 'hospitality code'. He asked the priest: '*Where are you going?*' and '*Where have you come from?*' How would we answer these profound questions (in relation to our attitudes to same-sex attraction and acceptance)?

But then some local men surrounded the house, pounded on the door and demanded the old man send out his guest so that the mob could have sex with him. *What?* The old man says their behaviour is vile and disgraceful. Baam! So, homosexuality is vile and disgraceful. It's Sodom and Gomorrah all over again.

Except the male mob isn't proposing a consensual, faithful, life-long same-sex relationship with the priest. They've never met him before; most don't even know what he looks like. This is indeed similar to 'Sodom and Gomorrah'. Again, it's about rape, men raping men, gang rape; using sexual violence to brutalise, dehumanise and humiliate another person, leaving them in no doubt of their powerlessness. It's using sexual violence to break the human spirit.

The old man was faced with a horrid dilemma. Who should he protect, his own 'flesh and blood' or the strangers he had only met a few hours ago? He knew what the mob were capable of. Through Western eyes the assumption is 'look after your own' first, and then – only if it's at all possible and safe to do so – assist the strangers. But this isn't the West, it's the East. And the all-important 'hospitality code' says, no matter what the cost or risk, welcome and treat

strangers as if they are your own flesh and blood. So, the old man was faced with an impossible decision: hand over his own 'flesh and blood' to the mob or hand over his own 'flesh and blood' to the mob. Either way, he'd blame himself for the rest of his life.

So, he handed his own 'flesh and blood' over to the mob. And they raped her. They repeatedly gang-raped the priest's lover throughout the whole night. Sickening. It's the same male mob who had earlier wanted to rape the priest. It wasn't that they were sexually attracted to the priest, they simply wanted to use sexual violence to break these 'strangers'.

When morning came, the mob let her go. Somehow, she managed to make it back to the house. But life was ebbing from her. She died in the doorway – alone – from the brutal and prolonged sexual assaults.

How could such a horrific crime have happened? Judges 19 opens with, "*In those days Israel had no king*" [Jud.19:1]. There was a total breakdown in civic society. No government, No rule of law. It was pure anarchy. The scene of a 'Mad Max' film.

The priest, who had clearly known his lover had been taken by the mob, had evidently gone to bed. Worse, in the morning, he went to leave the old man's house *and his lover* to continue his journey north. (Just what had he professed to her back at her parents' house that had convinced her to return to him?) And now he was abandoning her. But his exit was blocked by her *dead* body in the doorway. Even the priest couldn't ignore this. Who knows what went through his mind? He put her lifeless body on his donkey and took her back to his rural home.

Having travelled days with his lover's *dead* body and goodness knows what thoughts and emotions, on bringing her home, he dismembered her body - limb by limb. He then put together twelve parcels of body parts and sent them to the twelve tribes (leading families) across Israel. Logistically, how did he achieve that? No DHL or FedEx. So, either he sent servants out to walk the special deliveries or he embarked on a prolonged and very dark period of his life making the hand deliveries himself, one by one, over months, possibly years.

Today we understand a bit more about the psychological trauma caused by horrific incidents. PTSD – Post Traumatic Distress Disorder. We see that in battle-hardened combat troops that struggle to adjust outside of the war zone. Was the priest suffering from PTSD? Or did the priest suffer from an undiagnosed dangerous personality disorder?

What of those who received the parcels? They were horrified. Shock turned to anger when they discovered what had happened to the priest's lover. Made even worse (if that's possible) by the fact that the rapist murderers were members of one of their fellow tribes of Israel. This had been done by 'people like us' – some of their own.

What then followed escalated into a brutal, all-out civil war with the slaughter of tens of thousands of people. And, when the last battle had been fought and the offending tribe of Benjamin destroyed, the eleven remaining tribes were left ruminating the needless loss of their fellow tribe; there were now eleven tribes when there should have been twelve. Futility.

Yes, this is a troubling story about the vile and disgraceful behaviour of some men. What it is *not* is evidence that God condemns consensual, faithful, lifelong 'until death us do part' same-sex relationships. It's another stark reminder that sexual violence, be that towards women or men, has been part of our humanity's shameful past *and will continue to be so* until we as a society learn something of the 'hospitality code'.

What did Jesus say?

Let me be very clear, I believe and uphold every single word Jesus said about same-sex attraction.

Jesus said..

DRAFT

.. *nothing*.

Jesus said *nothing* about same-sex attraction.

At least not directly and not that Matthew, Mark, Luke or John thought worth recording.

More later.

What did Paul say?

For someone who speaks so often about grace and inclusivity, Paul is still often caricatured as a misogynist, anti-women, homophobic anti-gay. Part of the evidence for this is the appearance of – and interpretation of – three statements he made about homosexuality.

‘Proof text’ #5: Romans 1:26-28

“For this reason, God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”

Paul was paraphrasing, even parodying, the way many Greek-influenced Jews ‘demonised’ ‘Gentiles’ (all those who weren’t Jewish), circulating stories about how vile they were. We see how some ethnic or social groups are ‘demonised’ today. That’s why, after starting with praise for ‘us/you’, Paul then contrasts this by frequently referring to ‘they/them’. There is an ‘us’ and ‘them’. Until – bam – in Romans 2:1 he flips it. Paul’s point all along was *not* about what the Gentiles might or might not do or how bad they were. Instead, Paul was calling all people (and ‘believers’ who should have known better) to a non-judgmental way – the Jesus way.

Paul appears to have been referencing Leviticus 20:13.

Leviticus 20:13	Romans 1:27
<p><i>Statement of the act:</i> “If a man has sexual intercourse with a man as he would with a woman”</p>	<p><i>Statement of the act:</i> “the males traded natural sexual relations with females, and burned with lust for each other.”</p>
<p><i>Comment on the act:</i> “the two of them have done something detestable.”</p>	<p><i>Comment on the act:</i> “Males performed shameful actions with males”</p>
<p><i>Consequence of the act:</i> “They must be executed, their blood is on their own heads.”</p>	<p><i>Consequence of the act:</i> “They were paid back with the penalty they deserved for their mistake in their own bodies.”</p>

When Jesus said, “*You have heard that it was said.. but I tell you..*”, He was *not* contradicting the *Scriptures*; He was correcting the *religious elite’s* distorted *interpretations*. The Pharisees had a ‘glass half-empty’ view of God. Believing God angry, they aimed to keep Israelites on the right side of God. Instead, Jesus showed that God was radically *for* people, especially those the religious elite labelled ‘sinners’. When quoting Scripture, Jesus sometimes subtly shifted its focus. For example, when quoting Isaiah 53 (the ‘suffering servant passage’), Jesus included the first part of v.4, “*He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows*” [Isa.53:4a; Mt.8:17] but chose not to include the second half, “*Yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted*” [Isa.53:4b]¹⁰.

In Romans 1 Paul appears to have used the same approach. He quoted from Leviticus 20:13 but dropped the call for execution of homosexuals. Some say Paul removed the death penalty to make it easier for the church in Rome to ‘submit to the governing authorities’ [Rom.13:1-5]

as Rome tolerated homosexuality. More likely Paul was simply following Christ's example in calling people to be merciful and generous to all – even to those previously 'demonised'.

The insertion of chapters and verses in the Bible came 1500 years after Christ¹¹. Deciding where one chapter ends and the next starts is a matter of *interpretation*. Does one sentence conclude the last point or introduce the next? So, Paul wraps up his parody by declaring:

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”
Romans 2:1

The emphasis changes when Roman 2:1 is seen as a continuum of Romans 1. Paul's point was 'don't judge' (ironically opposite to how some apply Romans 1). We shouldn't be surprised that there are no quotation marks in the text. Again, Bible translators haven't used quotation marks because ancient Greek didn't have such punctuation and Paul was paraphrasing their sentiment, not reciting an exact quote.

Paul was demonstrating that neither the Gentiles, with their fertility cults in Romans 1, nor the Jews with their strict legalism in Romans 2, had the full understanding of God. Paul was building up to say 'ALL people (Gentiles and Jews, male and female, black and white, straight and gay, young and old... Keep going - ALL people) have sinned' [Rom.3:23] and ALL [those same ALL people] find justification through Christ. It's because of who Christ is and what He has done (not who we are and we have done.) That's why it's grace.

It's important to say, Paul was NOT giving people license to do whatever they like with whoever they like and whenever they like. Hedonism, lawlessness, and sexual impurity are *not* condoned in Christian discipleship. ALL people, whether attracted to the opposite sex or same sex, are called to pursue sexual purity. Whether 'straight' or 'gay', sex belongs within the commitment, faithfulness, and exclusivity of relationship between two people.

Paul was writing to the church in Rome. Then, Rome had the biggest temple to pagan gods, where temple prostitutes - male slaves - were castrated and 'given' to the temple to generate it's income. They were human-trafficked sex-slaves. Paul was not condemning the slave *victims* (who would?); Paul was strongly condemning those who, by buying sex from the trafficked temple sex slaves, were sustaining that oppressive system. Today, victims of sexual assault or sex trafficking are sometimes blamed or penalised, rather than the perpetrators.

Maybe Paul was also challenging unfaithful, non-monogamous sex. Was he speaking out against those who 'exchange' (swap) their sexual partners? Was he warning against risky sexual behaviours involving multiple sexual partners? After all, the men and women Paul refers to, *abandoned* (implying, it was their choice) 'natural relations' (their normal sexual attraction) with the opposite gender for sex with those of the same gender. It is their lustful and promiscuous behaviour with multiple partners that Paul is challenging, not their sexual orientation *per se*. That's why he refers to lust, but not love or faithfulness.

'Proof text' #6: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11a

“Or do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were.”

Paul gave examples of those who won't inherit the Kingdom of God. To be consistent, we mustn't separate the 'sexually immoral' and the 'men who have sex with men' from the greedy, those who drink too much, those who speak unfairly of others, and those who manipulate the system for their own financial gain.

Translating from Ancient Greek into English (or any other language) requires *interpretation*. For example, what the USA edition of the NIV translates as “*men who have sex with men*”, the NIV's UK edition translates as “*male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders*”, whereas the RSV translates as “*sexual perverts*”. Then the KJV comes in with “*nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind*”. What, for the RSV, makes someone a 'sexual pervert'? What one heterosexual married couple might consider sexual perversion (not 'their cup of tea') might be another heterosexual consenting married couple's more expressive and varied sex life. Likewise, what, for the KJV, makes someone 'effeminate'? That's full of cultural subjectivity.

In Bible translators' defence, not only must they do their vital work without Google Translate, they must also contend with Paul's habit of creating his own terminology. Language evolves. New words and phrases are emerging all the time. For example, to 'skitch' blends *skate/ski* and *hitch* and refers to holding on to a moving motor vehicle whilst on a skateboard or bicycle. Now that 'skitch' is officially in the English dictionary, how do you translate it into French?

In the same way, Paul sometimes created new language, merging two words to form one new word. Here, in 1 Corinthians 6 (and in 1 Tim.1:10-11), he merged the ancient Greek words *ade* out of the words “male” (ἄρσῆν) and “bed” (κοίτης) to make ἀρσενοκοίτης (*arsenokoitēs*). He wasn't referring to a literal 'male bed' (as if a bed has a gender). So, what did he mean?

The NIV's UK edition translates as “*male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders*”. Paul was once again condemning the practice of male prostitution and temple sex slaves. The NIV translators were making a distinction between the *victims* (male prostitution/ temple sex slaves) and the *offenders* (those who support and encourage such sex trafficking by purchasing sex with male sex slaves).

Paul's point wasn't to label some people worse than others; it was that, whilst we ALL have the potential to 'mess up' – to deceive and be deceived – in different ways [Rom.3:23], we ALL have the same opportunity to be sanctified, justified because its ultimately ALL about what Christ does, and His Spirit within us; not what we do. So, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 says:

*“Or do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. **But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**”*

Again, Paul was warning against sexual immorality, but it's far from clear he was condemning faithful, monogamous same-sex relationships.

'Proof text' #7: 1 Timothy 1:10-11

“The sexually immoral, for those who practice homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers, and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

As in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul here again used his new word ἀρσενokoίτης (arsenokoítēs) formed from the two other words ἄρσεν (‘male’) and κοίτης (‘bed’). But what did he mean? Though more recent Bible versions have translated ἀρσενokoίτης (arsenokoítēs) as ‘homosexuality’, given that the notion of sexual orientation as a social construct did not first appear until the mid-nineteenth century, it seems unlikely Paul was referring to what is currently understood as homosexuality. The UK edition of the New International Version simply translates it as “for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders...”

Incidentally, those who use ἀρσενokoίτης (arsenokoítēs) to refer to all gay people – men *and* women – have already strayed from the Biblical text because here Paul only referred to men (not women). To suggest 1 Timothy 1:10-11 includes lesbian couples is to go beyond the text.

First, Paul is making a broad point about the Law. Tom Wright¹² thinks Paul was linking ‘law breakers and rebels’ to the Ten Commandments [Exod.20:1-17]¹³. Paul included those who kill their fathers or mothers (the extreme opposite of honouring parents, the 5th Commandment); murderers (6th Commandment); adulterers and perverts (i.e. all kinds of non-married sexual activity, 7th Commandment); slave traders (an extreme form of stealing, 8th Commandment); liars and perjurers (9th Commandment) and the catch-all 10th Commandment. So, when Paul referred to ‘adulterers and perverts’ (which some Bible editions conflate with ‘homosexuality’), Paul was making a broader point: whilst sex outside of marriage in all its forms is just another example of unhealthy behaviour, it is the gospel (the radical good news) of Jesus - not the law - that reveals God’s glory.

Second, in referring to, “the sexually immoral, for those who practice homosexuality, for slave traders” Paul was again speaking out against the practice of male temple prostitution, men who sleep with them, and the slave dealers who procure them (just as 1 Cor.6). Paul had left Timothy in charge of the church in Ephesus. This was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire and home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the ‘seven wonders of the world’. The Temple was used to worship the fertility goddess known by the Greeks as Artemis and by the Romans as Diana. Sexual intercourse was seen as a re-enactment of the fertility cycle in nature, and thus pleasing to the goddess Artemis/ Diana. This fuelled the growth of a sex trade in which people were trafficked into prostitution to satisfy the desires of ‘worshippers’ (typically, male) to have a ‘spiritual experience’ with deity. Just as he said to the churches in Rome and Corinth, Paul’s point to Timothy was not about judging the *victims* of the sex trade (the prostitutes); he was demonstrating that the true God was far more knowable and without having to have sex with a temple prostitute. That’s why the good news is truly good news!

Once again, it appears there is a different way to understand what Paul was saying. He was not condemning faithful, life-long, monogamous ‘until death us do part’ same-sex relationships, rather the way some people are exploited and those who exploit them.

So, if the Bible’s seven direct references to homosexuality don’t appear to provide the clear unequivocal condemnation that some claim, what of the indirect teachings that others sometimes link as evidence of God’s wrath?

Verses that *indirectly* are often applied to homosexuality

As a teenager I was told I needed to wear glasses. I thought, 'If I have to wear glasses, I'm going 'all-in'. So, I ordered a huge pair of bright green and yellow frames and, as if that wasn't enough, added a strong green tint to the prescription lenses. These weren't my spare pair, they were my *only* glasses which I had to wear all the time. When I wore them, people looked at me. (People can be so envious at times!) However, when I looked back at *them*, they all seemed peculiarly ill. Their faces and hands looked slightly diseased or decayed. It was obviously contagious, because, when I then looked at my own hands, I too had caught what they had. My hands had also developed a peculiarly green tint. It was all very worrying.

Bishop Leslie Newbigin¹⁴ said, irrespective of our choice of eyewear, each of us have *invisible* lenses that filter our view of the world - in the same way that sunglasses give an altered perception of reality. These invisible lenses are based on our culture and history. They change (distort) how we see things. This led Newbigin to assert that no one is capable of reading the Bible in isolation. It's why people from different cultures and ages can give different interpretations to the same Bible passage. Just as everything seemed green when I wore my green and yellow glasses, it should come as no surprise that if we live in a sexist or homophobic society (or have been raised in a church that teaches same-sex relationship are inherently sinful), we can sometimes attach discriminatory interpretations so sections of the Bible that others wearing different cultural lenses see differently to us.¹⁵ If not corrected, our invisible lenses play tricks with us: we either see things that are *not* there or fail to see things that *are* there. Though it is not possible to remove Newbigin's invisible lenses, through a process of reflection and study, it is possible to *identify* and then *counter* their effect.

We'll explore some passages in the Bible that, whilst they don't mention same-sex relationships, are nevertheless sometimes applied as if they do. (We'll later look at passages that are not applied to same-sex attraction but probably should be.)

Genesis 1-2

²⁶ Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'

Genesis 1:26-28

'God created Adam and *Eve*, not Adam and *Steve*.'

That's the cheap quip some use to avoid engaging with the Bible. The argument goes like this. God created a heterosexual world order based on a man and a woman. Two men or two women would have been a deviation from this plan. The inference is, this set a pattern for all men and women to subsequently follow; God's ideal being that every single male should be joined to a single woman in heterosexual marriage so that they can be 'fruitful and increase in number' (conceive and have children). This is stated at the beginning of Anglican weddings¹⁶.

There are some obvious problems with this approach. If marriage is the ideal, what does that say about those who want to be married but haven't yet met the right person? What of those who once were married but are no longer (either because of divorce or bereavement)? What does it say about the positive value of being single? And then, what of those who are married but don't have children (because they've chosen not *now* or not *ever*, are not able to have children due to fertility issues, miscarriage or stillbirth, because they have experienced the tragedy of infant loss/ bereavement)? We must not condemn those that don't conform to a human projection of God's ideal or universal command.

Genesis was written in a pre-scientific age for a pre-scientific audience to articulate what many already instinctively knew: *we are not here by chance*. There was a time when all that we see did not exist. Then something happened. Out of nowhere (*ex nihilo*), something, someone, unbelievably powerful and yet wildly creative (the Ultimate Being - God) kicked off a sequential process that resulted in everything that we see - and are - coming into existence. The story of our 'being' is ultimately linked to, and totally dependent on, God's 'being' – our story with God's story. The whole Bible is the unfolding story of God's creation and re-creation, from alpha to omega. Genesis opens with, "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*" [1:1]

This matters because some today try to present Genesis as being a scientific and literal report of the precise mechanics God used to create the Cosmos in six 24-hour days (which just happens to be 144,000 hours – *symbolic* of total completeness¹⁷). What's more, some 'Young Earth'¹⁸ advocates even believe it's all less than 10,000 years old. For them, the central point is that, on the sixth day, God created a fully developed 'man' (Adam). Keeping with the literalism, curiously, God only later realised that something extra was needed to 'complete' the man, and so, reworked His plan, to create a 'wo-man' (Eve). They're trying to defend Genesis as 'science' when Genesis was written as a poetic narrative pointing to the bigger story of God¹⁹. A literal *interpretation* focuses on Adam and Eve being two literal human beings - the only two that existed initially – and that everything God said applied literally to these two individuals. However, once you become open to Genesis telling a bigger story about all of humanity (not just about two humans), then all that God said can be shared by humanity. This is liberating. Yes, humanity procreates (collectively), but not every individual human must. Yes, God created men and women but that doesn't mean every man must marry a woman.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good

The first chapter of the Bible celebrates that God did a good job with all that He made: planets, stars and moons; energy, seasons, and rhythm; plants and vegetation; animals, fish and birds. God declared it was all *good!* Then God created humans (humanity in 'Adam' and subsequently 'Eve') and declared them (us) to be very good [Gen.1:31]. Whilst what's become known as the doctrine of 'Original Sin'²⁰ focuses on the significance of chapter *three*, we do well to remember that the Bible, like all good books, starts with chapter one (not three) – what could be called, the doctrine of 'Original Goodness'²¹. Even after 'the Fall', God continued to refer to humanity as being made in the image of God [Gen.9:6]. That hadn't changed.

'Adam' stems from *adamah*, the ancient Hebrew for 'earth' (from which Adam was formed). In Genesis Adam refers to both a 'man' (a specific individual) [Gen.2:16] and 'mankind' (representative of all humanity – both men and women) [Gen.1:27]. Whilst Genesis 1 emphasises the commonality of humanity (men and women together), in Genesis 2's account Adam is made first. There was a time when Adam was humanity; Adam was a (the only) *human*, not a man. His gender (male) identity only became apparent with the introduction of Eve, the 'wo-man' [Gen.2:23]²². God doesn't just create, He also recreates. 'In Christ, we

become new creations. The old has gone, the new has come' [2Cor.5:17]. Then, our identity becomes shaped far more by our 'in Christ' status than by our gender or sexual orientation.

It is not good for the man to be alone.

Relationships are at the heart of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit co-exist together in perfect relationship as separate, co-equal persons of the Trinity. "*Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...'*" [Gen.1:26] Being made in the image of God, we thrive when in relationship with others. Whilst a marriage relationship might not be for everyone, co-existing with others in mutually-supportive, mutually-enriching relationships is.

God said everything He had made was good. Except one thing. It was *not* good for Adam to be alone. So, God created a helper. The majority identify as heterosexual, and so – if they choose – look to find their forever 'soul mate' in a member of the opposite gender. The intimacy they experience with their lifelong partner serves as a pattern for the intimacy Christ, the Bridegroom, seeks with His Bride, the Church. However, those who identify as gay find their 'soul mate' in someone of the same gender. Are we saying 'it's not good to be alone.. *unless you are gay*, in which case, you must remain alone for the duration of your whole life because the intimacy found in a lifelong partnership is only for heterosexual people'? Surely '*it is not good to be alone*' applies to all, irrespective of sexual orientation? Is God saying LGBT+ people are not as good as heterosexual people, and so not fit to have a 'forever partner'? Is God saying LGBT+ people are better than heterosexual people, and so better able to live in celibacy and find their intimacy with God alone? Neither seems reasonable. Why would God want to meet some people needs, but deliberately withhold the benefit from others? That would be to declare good precisely what God had originally said was *not* good!²³

I will make a helper suitable for him

Some interpret the later creation of Eve as suitable helper for Adam to mean that women must have a God-ordained *secondary*, supportive and submissive role to men, at least in a marriage relationship. This 'complementarian' thinking²⁴ (because, they claim, men and women have a God-ordained different but complementary role of equal value - if not equal position - to each other) must reject same-sex marriage in order to preserve the privileged rights they claim for men over women. Their 'world order' would collapse if it turned out the 'suitable helper' for some men was another man, not a woman. Who would be 'head of the household'?

Be fruitful and increase in number

Having blessed humanity, God said, "*Be fruitful and increase in number*" [Gen.1:28]. Some fundamentalists appear to rely on evolutionary arguments to say the future viability of 'Project Creation' was dependent on each man procreating with a woman for the purposes of having children. They argue homosexuality is a biological threat to the human race. For this reason, it's *every* man and woman's God-given duty to seek - and procreate - in a heterosexual union.

The fundamentalist procreation argument appears to prioritise reproduction, rather than placing the emphasis on the fruit that comes from entering into a loving, life-long, faithful relationship (which may or may not include having children)? If 'Adam' is about humanity as a whole (and, remember, initially Adam was the sum total of *all* humanity) then whilst humanity must reproduce, it's not the case that every single individual must.²⁵ When Adam and Eve were the sum total of humanity, the call to procreate had great urgency; now, with 7.5 billion humans on the planet, the call to procreate seems less pressing (and even irresponsible).

Again, if God's intent was that *all* people reproduce, what of single people without a partner? What of those bereaved? What of those struggling to conceive? What of those too young or too old? What of those simply wanting to delay 'starting a family'? Are we saying that's not

OK because they are *not* fulfilling God's command? Conversely, what of those who become pregnant without their consent? The result of sexual violence? The result of forced marriage²⁶? Are we saying that's OK because they *are* fulfilling God's command to procreate?

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh

Genesis refers to being 'united' or 'joined together' with another. It makes no mention of 'marriage' *per se*. That's because 'marriage', in the sense we understand it today, is more of a social construct used to publicly recognise and bestow legal rights and responsibilities. We must not confuse our modern, Western understanding of marriage, exemplified in the Victorian-inspired 'traditional white wedding' ceremony, with marriage in the Bible. Marriage didn't become a sacrament in the Catholic Church until the Twelfth Century. In the Early Church couples were joined together often without formal religious ceremonies.

The act of procreation or sexual intercourse does not actually require 'leaving and cleaving', and yet from the outset, the Bible asserts the expectation of lifelong, faithful union between two people. It's not enough to simply 'go forth and multiply'; it has to be in the context of loving and faithful intimacy. That applies equally to all, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation.

Christian understandings of the Scriptures should be Christo-centric. That is, we interpret the whole of the Scriptures through the lenses of Christ. So how did Jesus refer to Genesis?

Matthew 19:1-12

³Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'

⁴'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female,"⁵ 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"?⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

⁷'Why then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?'

⁸Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.' *Matthew 19:3-9*

In Jesus' day, marriage was the social 'norm', not the 'lifestyle choice' it is today. It was rare and shocking for someone of marrying age *not* to be married. And yet Jesus Himself was not married; something His observers and critics would have been only too aware of.

For those who oppose same-sex marriage, the significance of Christ's response is that marriage must be – can only be – between a man and a woman.

However, the context is that Jesus was asked a specific question about a troubled marriage *between a man and a woman*. It is not surprising therefore that He approached this heterosexual scenario by talking about a *man* and a *woman*. Jesus quoted, "*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will become one*

flesh” [Gen.1:27] because it was relevant Scripture to the scenario posed to Him. To say this proves marriage must be between a man and a woman is an interpretation beyond the text.

What is far easier to agree, Jesus was defending the validity and sanctity of marriage. He asserted that marriage was always intended to be monogamous: a lifelong, faithful, intimate relationship between two people. And that becoming ‘one flesh’ (sex) was to be an important part of this. Monogamy is not just, *don’t* have sex with someone you’re not married to. Monogamy as God intended is far more liberating, fulfilling and fun. It’s when two people commit themselves to each other: emotionally, physically, and sexually. It’s two people having sex – lots of it – with each other for the rest of their married lives together. There’s no need – or capacity – for sexual intimacy with anyone else because they are so focused on giving and receiving sexual intimacy with each other. Within the safety and security of their committed relationship, they can spend a lifetime discovering what pleases each other, and how to give and receive pleasure at each successive stage of life. Even if things aren’t quite right (be that for a night or a season), there is the reassurance that they are each committed to one other and their marriage to allow them time, space, love and neither is walking away. Marriages may suffer because of monotony but not because of authentic monogamy.

This is not about one partner asserting their right to be pleased by the other. There’s no place for demanding ‘conjugal rights’, as if one partner is the ‘property’ of the other. Paul made clear that Christ, being the ultimate Bridegroom, is the role model for all bridegrooms (husbands) to follow in the way He loves His bride, the Church. How did He love His Bride? By sacrificing Himself and His own needs for her. Again, linking back to the Genesis account, Paul asserted in Ephesians 5:25-35:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”

Paul developed this idea further in his letter to the Church in Corinth:

“Now for the matters you wrote about: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’ But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.”
1 Corinthians 7:1-7

To what extent is the church’s teaching as practical and direct about sex?

So, yes, Jesus affirmed the place of marriage. But why? Because marriage is more than just a social contract between two consenting people. It is a union between two people *and God*. “Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” [Mt.19:6]. Marriage between two people is also symbolic of the bigger story, the union between *Creator and Created*, Christ and Church, the Bridegroom (Christ) and Bride (the Church).

Whilst marriage is *intended* to be “till death us do part”, Jesus recognised that sometimes relationships do breakdown beyond repair. Many Pharisees (experts in the Law), believing God to be hard and angry towards His people, had become preoccupied with the technicalities of the law and the need to remain ‘legal’; they had forgotten the law was given to point us towards gracious and loving God – not to become a curse to us. They sought to discredit Jesus, by demonstrating He was either too lax or too judgmental about the difficult and sensitive topic of divorce²⁷. As ever, Jesus’ response was principally driven by love and compassion. As much as marriage is noble and good, sometimes the loving and compassionate response is to support people through their separation. In any case, Moses had been combating polygamy, whereby a man over a period of years might acquire multiple wives and then use frivolous reasons to ‘divorce’ each (thus rendering the divorced wife poverty-stricken). Once again Jesus demonstrated that his ‘yoke’ (His interpretation of the Scriptures) was different to that of the Pharisees²⁸. Furthermore, whilst claim divorce is always wrong (sinful), looking at the full picture of the Bible gives a different understanding. Again, Jesus was talking about divorce between a *man* and *woman* because that was the scenario pitched to Him by the Pharisees, not because marriage can never be between two people of the same sex. It’s marriage, not the gender, which was the issue.

Those who are same-sex attracted are called to follow Christ in just the same way as everyone else. I am categorically *not* suggesting that the Bible gives permission for people – whatever their sexual orientation – to live a lawless, hedonistic lifestyle. To become a disciple of Christ involves taking up your Cross daily to follow Him. If marriage is a gift from God that calls for faithful, lifelong commitment between two people, then the same high standards are required, whatever the sexual orientation of the married couple.

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, ‘If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.’ ¹¹ Jesus replied, ‘Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.’

Matthew 19:10-12

Marriage is clearly not for everyone. (Jesus Himself, along with John the Baptist and Apostle Paul, did not marry.) And now the disciples, having heard Jesus speak about the challenges of monogamous relationships, wonder whether it’s better to stay celibate. Jesus goes on to say there are some people for whom a heterosexual marriage would not work.

Jesus’ response surprised his disciples and it may surprise us too. Also surprising is the lack of attention given to it by many Biblical commentators, especially Evangelical ones.²⁹ That’s because Jesus suddenly introduced *eunuchs!*

Some say Jesus was merely advocating celibacy as an alternative to heterosexual union. Certainly, Apostle Paul would later affirm that marriage and celibacy are both gifts from God [1 Cor.7]. But what was a eunuch? And why were they relevant to what Jesus was saying about marriage?

In its most basic form, a eunuch was a male without testicles. This could have been the result of a birth defect, self-mutilation, or mutilation by others. Unable to produce hormones, eunuchs were sterile and had low or non-existent sexual function. They were viewed with suspicion and fear by some (almost mythical-like), and yet those in power found them – in a testosterone-charged culture - to be reassuringly non-threatening. Eunuchs (from the Greek ‘eunoukhos’, meaning ‘bedroom guard’) were entrusted with looking after their master’s close quarters and even his harem (safe in the knowledge they would not ‘make off’ with his women). Some were promoted to ‘high office’, acting as their master’s envoy or Chief Operating Officer. For example, Potiphar³⁰ (Gen.39) and Daniel³¹ (Dan.1)

Jesus gave three different reasons why some might be eunuchs.

First, Jesus said, “*there are eunuchs who were born that way*” (v.12). This could include those born without either the *sexual capability* (due to a birth defect or uncorrected physical condition) or the *sexual desire* (they are simply not attracted to the opposite sex). Some opponents of equal marriage, claim same-sex attraction is a lifestyle choice that LGBT+ people can switch on or off (or be healed from, as if a disease). By contrast, Jesus here appeared to affirm that some are simply ‘born this way’. It’s not a question of environment, conditioning or culture; it’s simply how they are made. They can no more choose their sexual orientation than their skin colour, height or any other biologically-determined characteristic. If it is accepted that some people are simply born gay, then surely the right response is to celebrate and declare that what God has made is indeed good. We’ll look later at the profound impact of Psalm 139.

Second, Jesus says, “*there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others*” (v.12). Others have physically altered them. Some boys were castrated before they started puberty to ensure their bodies retained child-like features, albeit with adult-height, such as high voice, non-muscular build, small penis, and no pubic hair. These children, ‘made eunuchs by others’, were mutilated and then used for the sexual gratification of others. However, it is too simplistic and crude to explain same-sex attraction as being the result of physical or sexual abuse in childhood, as some have done.

Chemical castration has been used to punish or ‘treat’ those convicted of homosexual acts. In 1952 Alan Turing, the British wartime code-breaking hero, was chemically castrated as an alternative punishment, having been found criminally guilty of a homosexual act. Tragically, two years later he killed himself. It was not until 2013 that the British Government initiated a Royal Pardon. Many others less famous than Turing have not received similar apologies. Today in some parts of the world LGBT+ people continue to be treated as criminals, made eunuchs by others through chemical castration.

Third, Jesus said, “*there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*” (v.12). This is often used to justify those that have taken a vow of celibacy as part of their ‘holy orders’. To devote themselves wholeheartedly to the service of God and others, they opt not to be distracted by a marriage relationship. They live *like eunuchs* because they have not actually been physically castrated. It’s rather that they either have a low sexual drive or choose to live a life that is not determined by their sexual drive.

Today, some same-sex attracted Christians believe (*or have been told*), for God’s sake, they must live a celibate life. Whilst they accept they are same-sex attracted, they believe (*or have been told*) it would be sinful for them to have a monogamous sexual relationship with someone of the same sex. They therefore live in denial of their sexuality out of their devotion to God - for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. People must be allowed to make their own responses.

However, it would be tragic if some make such a sacrifice due more to misinformation than personal conviction. Celibacy is for some (be they heterosexual or homosexual), but it is not the only option for Christians who are same-sex attracted.

Judaism didn't support genital castration. The Law stated, "*No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD*" [Deut.23:1]. Eunuchs were not allowed to become priests or enter the tabernacle. They were outsiders simply because of their lack of testicles. Jesus chose to go against the religious flow and affirm eunuchs. As well as showing His understanding (including His awareness that they weren't simply 'all the same'), Jesus affirmed their faith. Whilst Jesus was referring to eunuchs, not LGBT+ people we know today, there is nevertheless good parallel with the way Jesus chose to respond to eunuchs and how we should affirm LGBT+ people today.

Acts 8: 26-39

³⁶ As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?' ^[c] ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing." Acts 8:36-39

In the Book of Acts, Deacon Philip had a profound encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch who was spiritually open to exploring faith. In light of Christ's references to eunuchs, read again Acts 8:26-40. Then consider:

1. It was no accident that Philip encountered the eunuch. God was behind it, Philip was willing, and the eunuch was open. What might this suggest for you and your church's mission and ministry with LGBT+ people today?
2. '*What can stand in the way of my baptism?*' said the eunuch. How would you answer that question if it was asked by an LGBT+ person in your church today?
3. The encounter with Philip left the eunuch *rejoicing*. To what extent does your church foster the same response from LGBT+ people today?
4. The new convert does not appear to have been told to change his eunuch status/orientation.

Jude 7

*“⁵ Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord at one time delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. ⁶ And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling – these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. ⁷ In a similar way, **Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.**”*
Jude 5-7

Jude and his friends were challenged to contend for the faith, resisting the subtle abuse of grace by those who brought division through their unrestrained lawlessness. It appears some had mistakenly thought grace meant they could do whatever they liked, without any consequences or reference to God. These godless men had changed the grace of God into a licence for immorality, and were following their natural instincts, perversions and evil desires. Jude was reminded of what had happened to Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns. It appears a similar culture had developed in Jude’s time and place³².

Remember, the sin exposed in Sodom and Gomorrah was not that of a couple entering into a faithful, ‘till death us do part’, same-sex relationship but, rape; men raping men, gang rape. So, yes, those who use sexual violence to brutalise, dehumanise and humiliate others are to be considered godless and immoral people who have given themselves over to their base instincts, perversions and evil desires. No wonder that God condemns such actions. So should we. It would be disingenuous to apply this to monogamous, faithful same-sex relationships.

By contrast, Jude was reminded to remain in God’s love and show mercy to others.

So, what else does the Bible say?

Luke 7:1-10

I believe every word that Jesus is recorded as saying about homosexuality. Jesus said.. nothing! Given how much is said today by those who seek to condemn same-sex attraction and equal marriage, it’s worth remembering that Jesus Himself, said nothing about it.

Some argue Jesus’ silence was because same-sex attraction was not a Jewish issue. Had it been, they say, He would have addressed it (and, they presume, condemned it). But that seems a little naïve. We know that homosexuality was a feature of Roman life and that, by the time of Jesus’ public ministry, the Romans had occupied Israel for almost a hundred years. Does this ‘back story’ help to explain Jesus’ encounter with the Roman Centurion [Mt.8; Lk.7]?

The Centurion, despite being the local commander and therefore representative of the military oppression, had earned the respect of many local people because of his ‘hearts and minds’ support for the Jewish community. He was taking a *huge* personal risk by asking for help for his sick slave from local religious people. As a Centurion, he was supposed to be enforcing ‘Caesar is Lord’³³. But he was desperate – that desperate – he asked some Jewish Elders to find ‘this Jesus’ who was said to have healing powers.

But why the desperation?

Doctor Luke, author of Luke's Gospel, recorded, "*a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was ill and about to die*" [Lk.7:2]. It was not uncommon in Roman culture for some male slaves to provide a sexual function for their masters. This Centurion had a special attachment to one particular servant and so, when the servant became critically ill, the Centurion threw caution to the wind in search of a cure.

He found it in Jesus.

Incidentally, many modern Bible translations prefer 'servant' to the more accurate 'slave'. This is a story about a Centurion who had slaves. Many modern translators have adjusted the linguistics to fit our age which, rightly, rejects slavery. Whilst there was a time when the Bible (including this incident with the Centurion) was used to justify slavery as part of God's ordained structure for humanity, the translators rightly recognise the full picture of the Bible rejects slavery, so they substitute 'slave' for 'servant'. Perhaps translators need to show the same courage when dealing with the texts associated with same-sex attraction that we have already examined?

Matthew and Luke do *not* provide enough information for us to be able to say with any certainty the Roman Centurion had a sexual involvement with his young male slave (at least not in the way sexual orientation is understood today). But, given what we know of Roman culture, neither can it be ruled out. If the Centurion was same-sex attracted, Jesus' response would be all the more remarkable and poignant for today. Far from condemning this outsider, Jesus commended the Centurion's faith and healed his servant.

What is beyond question is just how radically inclusive Jesus was. Luke in particular demonstrates how Jesus frequently broke religious and social conventions of His day to *include* those that others *excluded*. Women, children, the sick, 'sinners', all found life-changing acceptance. The list was *indicative* not exhaustive. In other words, the key message was that Jesus overcomes social, religious and cultural barriers to include people. To be a follower of Christ today is to be as inclusive in our dealings with people – all people as Christ was.

What is also beyond doubt is that Jesus taught love. When asked by an expert in the Law to summarise, what we call, the Old Testament, Jesus did so by saying it's all above love: love God; love others, love yourself. Later, Paul affirmed, "*For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'*" [Gal.5:14]. Love was clearly seen as central to the Gospel and the very nature or essence of God. God IS Love [1 Jn.4:7]. It's not that God loves us; it's that God IS Love. Anyone who has ever loved anyone or anything, has experienced God because God IS Love. If, as the Scriptures declare, we are made in the image of God, and if God is Love, then humanity is made in the image of Love. This applies to ALL people, whether male or female, young or old, gay or straight, whatever their heritage, ethnicity, or other label.

Please note...

This paper is a work in progress. There's more to come

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References

¹ The Equality Act 2010 covers discrimination at work, equal access to goods and services, education, access to public premises and associations/voluntary groups. It identifies sexual orientation as a ‘protected characteristic’ group which means people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual/straight are protected against:

1. *Direct discrimination*, for example, is refusing someone a job or service because of their sexual orientation.
2. *Indirect discrimination* is making decisions, or a public body planning services, in a way that disadvantages lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual/straight people unless the policy can be objectively justified.
3. *Discrimination by association* is about discrimination of a person because of their association with another person; for example, as a family member or a carer.
4. *Discrimination by perception* is about the discrimination of people based on the perception that they have a particular sexual orientation even if that is not in fact the case.

² The Civil Partnership Act 2004 gave same-sex couples entering into a Civil Partnership the same rights and responsibilities as married heterosexual couples in the UK.

³ The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013

⁴ See examples of how different Bible translations deal with 1 Timothy 1:10-11:

Bible translation	Year	Text: 1 Timothy 1:10-11
Geneva Bible	1557	¹⁰ To whoremongers, to buggers, to menstealers, to liars, to the perjured, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to wholesome doctrine, ¹¹ Which is according to the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, which is committed unto me.
King James ‘Authorised’ Bible	1611	¹⁰ For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; ¹¹ According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust.
Young’s Literal Translation	1862	¹⁰ whoremongers, sodomites, men-stealers, liars, perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that to sound doctrine is adverse, ¹¹ according to the good news of the glory of the blessed God, with which I was entrusted.
Darby Bible	1890	¹⁰ fornicators, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers; and if any other thing is opposed to sound teaching, ¹¹ according to the glad tidings of the glory of the blessed God, with which *I* have been entrusted.
American Standard Version	1901	¹⁰ for fornicators, for abusers of themselves with men, for menstealers, for liars, for false swearers, and if there be any other thing contrary to the sound doctrine; ¹¹ according to the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust.
Revised Standard Version	NT 1946; OT 1952	¹⁰ immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.
Amplified Bible	1965	¹⁰ for sexually immoral persons, for homosexuals , for kidnappers and slave traders, for liars, for perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.
The Living Bible	1971	¹⁰⁻¹¹ Yes, these laws are made to identify as sinners all who are immoral and impure: homosexuals , kidnappers, liars, and all others who do things that contradict the glorious Good News of our blessed God, whose messenger I am.

⁵ See Gordon Wenham’s *Genesis 16-50 Vol 2* (Zondervan, 2015).

⁶ See Elaine Storkey’s *Scars Across Humanity: understanding and overcoming violence against women* (SPCK, 2015)

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- ⁷ See Rob Bell's most excellent, if bold, *'What Is The Bible: How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories can transform the way you think and feel about everything'* (William Collins, 2017).
- ⁸ Concubines were taken as wives but without the rights or recognition as wives.
- ⁹ Domestic violence doesn't just happen in 'those' (problem) families. It also happens in church families. It happens in church minister's homes too. Checkout www.restoredrelationships.org
- ¹⁰ Would Jesus have endorsed the later 'penal substitution' model of the atonement?
- ¹¹ The first Bible in English to use both chapters and verses was the Geneva Bible published around 1560 AD.
- ¹² NT Wright (when writing in more academic mode) or Tom Wright (when writing more popularly) is cited and quoted by conservatives, liberals, and progressives to justify their arguments. For example, the Church of England House of Bishops Piling Report Working Group on Human Sexuality (2013) included both 'accepting' and 'rejecting' theological papers – both cited Rt Rev Wright to support their opposing arguments!
- ¹³ See Tom Wright's *Paul for Everyone: The Pastoral Letters - 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (SPCK, 2013)
- ¹⁴ See Leslie Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, 1989).
- ¹⁵ I first wrote this in my book *Joined Up: an introduction to youth work and ministry* (Authentic, 2004). This is no new 'fad' of mine.
- ¹⁶ Church of England wedding service begins with:
In the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we have come together to witness the marriage of N and N, to pray for God's blessing on them, to share their joy and to celebrate their love.
- Marriage is a gift of God in creation through which husband and wife may know the grace of God. It is given that as man and woman grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind, as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.*
- The gift of marriage brings husband and wife together in the delight and tenderness of sexual union and joyful commitment to the end of their lives. It is given as the foundation of family life in which children are [born and] nurtured and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad, may find strength, companionship and comfort, and grow to maturity in love.*
- Marriage is a way of life made holy by God, and blessed by the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ with those celebrating a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Marriage is a sign of unity and loyalty which all should uphold and honour. It enriches society and strengthens community. No one should enter into it lightly or selfishly but reverently and responsibly in the sight of almighty God.*
- N and N are now to enter this way of life. They will each give their consent to the other and make solemn vows, and in token of this they will [each] give and receive a ring. We pray with them that the Holy Spirit will guide and strengthen them, that they may fulfil God's purposes for the whole of their earthly life together.*
- ¹⁷ See Revelation 7:3-8; 14:1; 14:3-5.
- ¹⁸ Young Earth creationists take the genealogies listed in the Bible as being the complete and literal 'family tree' and trace back from Jesus Christ (Year 0) to Adam (hence their claim that Adam was created less than 8,000 BC, and the earth created just five days before Adam.) Young Earth creationists reject any suggestion that the genealogies were 'snapshots' grouped in patterns to make a point.
- ¹⁹ Genesis 1-3 is poetic in language in the same way that Job poetically describes the earth as having edges, there being storehouses of snow [Job38].
- ²⁰ First referred to by Bishop Irenaeus (130-202 AD) in the Second Century and later developed by Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD), though also featured in some pre-Christian ancient Greek thinking. See J. N. D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* (Harper Collins, 1978).
- ²¹ 'Original Goodness' or 'Original Blessing' was championed by Irish/British early Christian monk, Pelagius (354-360), who rejected Augustine's predestination theology.
- ²² See John Goldinay's *Genesis for Everyone: Part 1 Chapters 1-16* (SPCK, 2010).
- ²³ In fact, being alone was the very first thing God declared to be NOT good.
- ²⁴ Complementarianism has been recently championed by the likes of Mark Driscoll, Tim Keller, J I Packer, John Piper, and Terry Virgo.
- ²⁵ If it helps, using John Calvin's (1509-1564) General and Particular distinction, all humanity share's the General calling to procreate, whereas not all individual humans have the Particular calling to do so.
- ²⁶ Forced marriage, not 'arranged marriage' which requires consent of that accepting the 'arranged' partner.
- ²⁷ See R.V.G. Tasker's *Matthew* (IVP, 1983).
- ²⁸ For an explanation of the meaning of 'yoke' see Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis: repainting the Christian faith* (Collins, 2012)

²⁹ Many evangelical commentators make little or no mention of Jesus' reference to different kinds of 'eunuchs'. For example. Stephen Dray's *Discovering Matthew's Gospel* (Crossway, 1998); R.T.France's *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2007); R.V.G.Tasker's *Matthew* (IVP, 1983). Even Tom Wright's *Matthew for Everyone: Part 2* (SPCK, 2002).

³⁰ Was Potiphar, as second in command only to Pharaoh, a eunuch? Could he have been awarded a 'wife' as a veneer of respectability, despite being unable to have a sexual relationship? Does this explain why Potiphar's wife was so desperate for sexual intimacy, even with a stranger like Joseph?

³¹ Was Daniel a eunuch? He was taken into captivity in an age when victorious armies castrated their spoils of war; he served under the Chief Eunuch [Dan.1:3]; Isaiah had prophesied to Hezekiah "some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" [2Ki.20:18]; Daniel never married. But the Bible doesn't say.

³² See Tom Wright's *Paul for Everyone: The Early Christian Letters - James, Peter, John and Judah* (SPCK, 2011)

³³ See NT Wrights, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is news and what makes it good?* (SPCK, 2015).

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