

The Bible and Same Sex Marriage

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to thank each one of you for coming here tonight to engage in a very sensitive and important conversation with Scripture and with each other. I want to clarify at the outset that this is **My Testimony**, not a lecture, not a sermon. It's the story of my journey with Scripture from a traditional to an affirming position regarding same sex marriage. I would not want anyone who holds the traditional view of marriage to feel attacked or disrespected by what I say tonight. You've got 2000 years of church history on your side. My goal tonight is not to persuade you to change your position. Argumentation is not how people change their position on these kinds of things anyway. My goal is to explain to you how and why I have come to read Scripture differently regarding same sex marriage. Many people today are all in favor of same sex marriage but still have questions about how to square it with Scripture. I hope that what I have to say tonight can make all of us, whatever our position on same sex marriage, better students of Scripture.

Facing the harm caused by the church's position

My journey to reexamine the traditional position on marriage that I held and preached for years began where most who have taken this journey began – with the harm that the church and society have done to the queer community. (“Queer,” by the way, is not the malicious term it used to be, but is now a positive umbrella term to refer to anyone who is not heterosexual or cisgender which then includes LGBTQIA etc.) Back to my point, in my experience, most Christians who support same sex marriage today began that journey to reconsider what Scripture teaches, not because of idle curiosity or societal pressure, but because of the bad fruit, the serious harm upon queer siblings in Christ that has resulted from the church's traditional position and use of Scripture to defend it. Church-inflicted harm, by the way, that every CRC synod addressing human sexuality from 1973 to 2022 has acknowledged and confessed.

It's hard for straight people to appreciate how the church's and society's condemnation of queer people often compounds internalized shame and self-hatred and loneliness that in turn causes depression and substance abuse and further alienation from family, and even suicide—all very quantifiable bad fruit and serious harm that has accompanied the church's traditional approach in these matters.

The problem of harm and bad fruit, of course, also extends to the body of Christ as a whole, and to the poisonous impact upon the whole Christian community when we intentionally ostracize and stigmatize a certain group of God's image bearers.

That is what forced me, compelled me to go back to Scripture and ask, Am I reading Scripture correctly? And is there perhaps another way to read Scripture that more faithfully honors Scripture itself and that bears better fruit?

THREE “AH-HA’S”

As I look back at my journey of change on this issue, I realize that there were three “ah–ha” moments for me, three moments of discovery, big shifts in how I understand the Bible on these matters.

“Ah–ha” #1

Begin with Jesus’ love command.

The first “ah–ha” for me was to begin with Jesus’ love command instead of with the five passages which make some kind of negative reference to same sex activity. That’s actually a basic principle of biblical interpretation: we interpret less clear passages in the light of more clear passages, not the other way around. Or as biblical scholar Dr. Jeffrey Weima says, there are certain verses of Scripture you should **shout** and certain verses you should **whisper**. You shout verses that state clear, central gospel truths, you whisper less clear verses, verses that beg for further understanding. You shout Ephesians 2:8–9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith”—a central truth that reverberates throughout Scripture. You whisper I Timothy 2:15, “A woman shall be saved through childbearing.” You don’t build a theology of salvation on that verse.

Jesus’ command to love one another is the most central command in all of Scripture.

As I have loved you, love one another. **John 13:34**

God is love. **I John 4:7–21**

Which is the greatest commandment in the law, the Pharisees ask? ... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. And... Love your neighbor as yourself. **Matthew 22:34–40**

Love does no harm to a neighbor. **Romans 13:10**

What struck me further with this first “ah–ha” is **the distinctive angle** to Jesus’ love. Jesus has a special heart for the excluded, the judged, the outsider, the ones that the insiders, whether it’s the church or society, look down upon.

Jesus doesn’t just notice lepers, he touches them.

He eats with tax-collectors and sinners (people shunned from proper society).

He gives the middle of his day to a five-time divorced, Samaritan woman.

He doesn’t just talk to Zacchaeus, the hated tax collector. He invites himself over to his house for lunch.

Jesus doesn’t just love randomly. Jesus has a special heart for the excluded, the outsiders.

I don't know of a group of people in our society who fit more exactly into that category than queer people. And it's getting worse. Ask a queer person you know whether they feel safer today than they felt ten years ago. I believe that if the church were behaving like Jesus wants it to, queer persons would feel most safe in the church, not least safe.

That was my first "ah-ha." Begin with love and with Jesus' love command. Begin with the center—the kingdom of God that Jesus' love creates, a kingdom that lifts up the downtrodden and scatters the proud.

"Ah-ha" #2

Explore more carefully what those five condemnation passages most likely are (and are not) condemning.

Depending on how you count there are roughly five passages that in one way or another condemn some form of same sex behavior. I want to quickly go through each of these passages. But I want to tell you ahead of time what my "ah-ha" with these passages was.

The more I drilled down into these passages, the more I realized what these passages most likely are and are not condemning.

These passages most likely are condemning sexual perversions like rape, violence, sex with young boys, sex-trafficking; and just sheer unbounded lust and sexual excess that demeans and exploits image bearers of God—things all of us would condemn.

But equally important is realizing what these passages are not condemning.

These passages could hardly be condemning same sex orientation the way we understand it today—a natural orientation people do not choose but discover spontaneously as they develop from childhood into adolescence and adulthood. As best we can tell, people in Bible times assumed that people involved in same sex activity were heterosexuals who were freely and willfully choosing to rebel against their "natural" heterosexual orientation (as we'll see in Romans 1).

Moreover, these passages could hardly be condemning same sex marriage since there is no compelling evidence that such relationships, certainly as we know them now, existed then.

My second "ah-ha" related to all these verses: These verses are condemning **exploitative sexual perversions, not same sex orientation or same sex marriage** as we know it today.

Let's briefly look at each of these verses:

1. Genesis 19:1–38

Genesis 19:1–38 is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even traditionalists agree that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, as the Bible itself later explains it (Ezekiel 16:49–50), was its extreme inhospitality to the outsider. Specifically, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was gang rape and violence! Very few people on

either side of the same sex marriage debate consider the Sodom and Gomorrah story to be relevant to that debate.

2. **Leviticus 18:22** (repeated in **20:13**)

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

And 20:13 adds the penalty of death for doing so.

Leviticus is a difficult book to understand and apply to our moral lives today. The book bans all kinds of behaviors, some of which are not intrinsically evil, like eating pork, many of which are punishable by death or infertility. But do we believe today that infertility is God's punishment for sin? Do we believe two adolescents of the same sex who explore their awakening sexuality together should be put to death? If we say no, how did we decide that? This is the difficult work of biblical **interpretation**, doubly difficult in the book of Leviticus, a book in which it is doubly important to whisper, not shout.

As to these two verses, it's important to understand that the major purpose of Leviticus, and particularly of this abomination section within the book of Leviticus, is to guard Israel's holiness over against the surrounding nations. Do not be like the nations! Well, the pagan worship of many of those surrounding nations included sexual perversions like temple prostitution and explicit sex acts in worship.

Given that the ancient world had no concept of same sex attraction as a natural, not an unnatural, orientation for some people, it's understandable that Leviticus would view all same sex activity as rebellion against God and our nature and would see all same sex activity as of one piece with what the pagan nations were doing—rebellious against God and nature. The ancient world simply did not have a concept of inborn same sex attraction which the CRC, for 50 years already, has said is not, in itself, sinful. And Leviticus certainly did not have a concept of loving, committed same sex relationships that we now know as marriage.

3. **I Corinthians 6:9–10**

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, men who engage in illicit sex, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

Much has been written on the Greek words *malakoi* (literally “soft” “passive”) and *arsenokoitai* (literally “male intercourse,” translated “male prostitutes”). These words are very rare in the NT, the latter occurring only once, and very rare in the broader ancient world, so we're not really sure exactly what they're referring to.

Here's the interpretation that I think has the best explaining power and is the least forced: 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 is a vice list (one of several in the NT), and *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* refer to the passive and active partners in pederasty, men having sex with boys, commonly practiced in the New Testament era, especially in Corinth. Sometimes Roman officers purchased boy slaves, sometimes they rented the boys through temple prostitution. In short, it's what today we would call sex trafficking.

Now, the translations of these two words are controversial. The Human Sexuality Report of Synod 2022 (which I'll just call the "HSR" from now on) spends most of four pages trying to refute any attempt to link these two terms, especially *arsenokoitai*, to sex with young boys. They call such interpretations "revisionist."

But now we must ask who is being a revisionist here?

Before 1946, *arsenokoitai* was not translated "homosexual" in any English translation.

In the 1800s, German Bibles translated the word as "boy molesters," as they did I Timothy 1:10, the next verse we'll look at that has the same Greek word.

If you look up *arsenokoitai* in a 15th century lexicon, it traces the word back to a Latin word: *paedico*—as in Pediatrics. And how does it translate *paedico*? **Pederasty** (men having sex with young boys).

Even more amazing, Martin Luther used the word *knabenschander* (boy molester) in his original 1534 German translation of *arsenokoitai*.

It is unforced, not revisionist, to believe that pederasty in Corinth is the reference behind these obscure terms.*

4. I Timothy 1:9–10

I Timothy 1:9–10 uses the same Greek word, *arsenokoitai*, as is used in the Corinthians passage we just reviewed. It appears in the sin list between two other words that connote sexual perversions—fornicators and slave traders (NRSV). In line with what we just learned about this word, many believe that Paul is also talking here about what we call sex-trafficking.

5. Romans 1:24–27

Romans 1:24–27 is part of a theological argument Paul is making, namely, that all people, including the believers he's writing in Rome, stand under God's judgment for sin. He's just been describing wickedness in the extreme, people who "suppress the truth" about God and nature, who worship idols of their own making—birds, animals, humans, you name it.

And now, vs. 24–27:

²⁴ *Therefore God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.*

(Yes, at some point God turns off the magnets that keep pulling us to him. He says, "Have it your way!")

²⁵ *They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*

(And now he describes how crazy it all gets)

²⁶ *For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,*

(And now Paul clarifies what he means by “natural,” the key to understanding these verses)

²⁷ *and in the same way also **the males, giving up natural intercourse with females**, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.* (That is, ultimately, you think you can break God’s law but God’s law breaks you.)

So the “natural” sexual relationship here is “heterosexual;” the sin Paul is describing here is heterosexual men and women who throw off their natural attractions for people of the opposite sex to have same sex experiences that are “unnatural” for them—after all, they’re heterosexual!

Full stop! Notice, Paul is not talking about people that today we would call same-sex attracted! These are heterosexual men and women who seem to be some combination of bored, perverse and drunk, totally bent upon self-gratification.

These verses are a steamy picture of **lust**, and how lust, all-consuming sexual desire, when totally untethered from God’s design for sexual love within marriage, degrades human beings and human relationships. It is “Las Vegas gone wild.”

Again, Romans 1 is not talking about people who are naturally (to use Paul’s word) same sex attracted. And it certainly is not describing two same-sex attracted people who enjoy the spiritual graces of marriage. Not even close.

This is a very important point and here’s why. The HSR argues that it’s possible my whole second “ah–ha” is wrong; it’s **possible** that Paul did have some notion of fixed same sex orientation and of mature, longer-term same sex relationships. Now, I think that’s anachronistic; that is, it’s like saying Paul had an iPhone; or maybe a better analogy, saying Paul knew that the earth revolves around the sun, not the sun around the earth. No, he didn’t. Copernicus discovered that in the 16th century. Well, innate same sex orientation and same sex marriage as we know and experience them today are much later constructs than the 16th century, so Paul really couldn’t have known about them.

Nevertheless scholars still argue about what Paul possibly knew or didn’t know. So how do we get beyond just pitting “my scholars” against “your scholars” which the HSR does. I think we have a really good way to cut through this question: Let’s look at **the text**, the Bible! These verses in Romans 1 are the only verses in all of Paul’s NT writings where he actually talks about same sex activity. Let’s ask of these verses what Paul seems to know or not know about inborn same sex orientation and same sex committed relationships as we understand them.

Given what we already learned as we went through these verses, I think we can conclude that in Romans 1:24–27,

Either Paul isn’t even talking about queer people, which I think is the case—he’s talking about **lust**, and he assumes the whole world is heterosexual, “natural” in orientation, verse 27, and has no concept of same sex orientation or same sex marriage;

Or, Paul is somehow in the queer realm here, but in that case, he certainly doesn't understand innate same sex orientation as we understand it today (his use of the word "natural" is totally confused—ask a gay person what's "natural" to him or her!); and there is nothing in Paul's description of this sickening sex orgy that even comes close to describing the same sex married people I know.

I think Romans 1 is a revealing window, and at the end of the day, the only textual window we have, into what Paul did and did not understand about same sex orientation and same sex marriage.

This second "ah-ha" was pivotal for me: These passages are condemning **exploitative sexual perversions and excesses that no one should defend**; these passages are not condemning **sex orientation or same sex marriage** as we know them today.

The one big question that I still had to struggle with was, What does the Bible teach about marriage itself? Which quickly led to my third "ah-ha," namely,

"Ah-ha" #3

Explore more carefully what is (or is not) at the heart of marriage in Genesis 2:20–25.

Those verses begin with God creating Eve from Adam's rib. And then (v. 23) the man said,

²³ *"This at last is bone of my bones*

and flesh of my flesh;

this one shall be called Woman,

for out of Man this one was taken."

²⁴ *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

²⁵ *And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.*

One flesh – Anatomy or Companionship?

Reformed theologian Dr. James Brownson suggests that the best way to get at what is and is not at the heart of marriage in Genesis 2 is to look more closely at this concept of "one flesh" in these verses and in the Bible generally.

Is the "one flesh" that Adam and Eve celebrate in Genesis 2:24 first of all a reference to sexual anatomy? Or is "one flesh" about companionship, kinship, someone who is like me, the thing that Adam celebrates in v. 23—"flesh of my flesh?" Dr. Brownson argues that this term "one flesh" in other parts of Scripture actually is less about sex and anatomy, and more about kinship and belonging. For example, Laban says to Jacob in Gen. 29:14, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" Laban wasn't Jacob's sex partner; they were kin, family.

He argues further that the main problem that the creation of a second human addresses is **aloneness** ("it is not good that man should be alone") more so than **fruitfulness** (procreation). In this view Adam's cry, "flesh of my flesh" could be paraphrased, "Oh thank God I don't have to talk to just birds and turtles the rest of my life! I have someone like me to be with!"

If “one flesh” and “flesh of my flesh” is not first of all an anatomical reference, but is about companionship and love, then it may not be forced at all to include same sex attracted people in this beautiful picture of marriage in Genesis 2.

Foundational but not Limiting Instance

But now, I hear you saying, “Come on Duane, just admit it, this is Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” To which I think we need to say, There is no doubt that the male-female relationship in Genesis 2 is what Amy Plantinga Pauw calls a **foundational instance**, a foundational paradigm of human relationship, especially when we are thinking about procreation—having children. But that does not mean that it’s a **limiting instance**, that is, that’s it’s the only instance, that there can be no other acceptable instances in which the mystery of marriage and the wonder of flesh-of-my-flesh and one flesh love and companionship can be enjoyed.

Matthew 19

But now, I hear you astute students of the Bible say, What about Jesus’ teaching on divorce in Matthew 19? Jesus says,

⁵ *‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’* ⁶ *So they are no longer two but one flesh.* And now Jesus’ point: ***Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.***

Indeed, Jesus is talking here about **divorce and the permanence of marriage**. And he goes back to the foundational instance (not necessarily a limiting instance), but the **foundational instance** of Adam and Eve to say, God created you and God designed the marriage relationship to be permanent. The **permanence of marriage** is what he’s talking about here.

Ephesians 5:31–32

Which brings us to one last New Testament teaching that harks back to the “one flesh” of Genesis 2:24: Ephesians 5:31–32

³¹ *‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’* ³² *This is a great mystery, but I am speaking about Christ and the church.*

Paul actually says here, in so many words, that the mystery of marriage, of the two becoming one flesh, is not a reference to physical anatomy, to sex; he says, “I am speaking about Christ and the church.” Paul is linking the mystery of the **foundational instance** of marriage to the **union between Christ and the church** which is not sexual. This teaching of Paul actually supports the idea that “one flesh” in Scripture refers not to sexual anatomy but to human and sacred communion.

The Essence of Marriage—Covenantal Love

In the understanding of marriage I’m setting forth here, the essence of marriage according to the Bible is covenantal love, exemplified in the love of Christ for his church—not procreation (as Romans Catholics believe) and not anatomical complementarity (that is, you have to be the opposite sex). And if covenantal love is at the essence of marriage, why would we (or God) want to forbid two same sex attracted people the good fruit of this same covenantal love?

Is God Tricky?

At this point we must name a wonderful and beautiful fact that is often lost on people in this discussion: People who are gay and lesbian and who fall in love have the same amazing “I can’t believe we found each other!” experience, the same dizzying power of attraction and love that heterosexuals have, and that Adam and Eve illustrate. To acknowledge that God has made us all lovers who long to be cherished by a special partner, but then deny even the possibility of that love to same sex attracted children of God (which is different than the situation of single heterosexual people who are allowed to marry) is to risk concluding that God is a tricky God who is neither merciful nor just.

Do we believe that God would make two same sex attracted people to experience the wonder of love and of being cherished, the sacredness of commitment, the joy of companionship and of sharing a life together, but then, when two people find all of that in each other, that God declares, “But no, you can’t have this.” Do we believe in a tricky God?

Kind of like the tricky God who some people believe makes the world look like it’s billions of years old by planting fossils in it, but it’s really only 6,000 years old.

Or the tricky God who some people believe makes it look like women have the gifts to lead men just like men lead women, but then doesn’t allow women to lead men—the complementarian argument.

On this last example, I can still see Jack Vos, a Dutch Canadian minister, at synod in the 90s when we were debating women in office, saying with deep eloquence and reverence, as he pointed his finger upward, “But Reformed people do not believe that God is a tricky God!” And, of course, that’s because Reformed people have this wonderfully robust understanding of creation!

If “one flesh” and “flesh of my flesh” is not first of all an anatomical, sexual reference, but is about companionship and love; and if Adam and Eve are a **foundational instance** but not a limiting instance for marriage, why would we (or God) forbid two same sex attracted people from experiencing the wonder of love, the sacredness of commitment and the joy of companionship that is afforded in marriage?

CONCLUSION

That is my testimony. Just two concluding words.

First, I realize these three “ah–ha’s” (especially the last two) are significant shifts in biblical interpretation for many of us. And that’s why it’s important to end where we began, with the harm, the bad fruit of the church’s traditional position, and the desperate need for us to be honest about that and to find a better way.

I believe with all of my heart that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for our flourishing, our shalom, for an abundant life (to use Jesus’ words). And my testimony this evening would be that these ways of reading Scripture, that are remarkably unforced and fully within a Reformed framework of biblical

interpretation, bear the good fruit of unconditional love and acceptance; that in turn brings flourishing and joy and abundance and health, not harm; and brings that not only to our queer siblings in Christ but to the whole community that is Christ's body. Indeed, we all need to be healed!

Second, and finally, I could be wrong. I could be wrong. This is my journey, but given that so many of these biblical interpretations have counter interpretations, is this all just a flip of a coin? How do we know? I think there are deeply personal factors that go into where each of us ends up in our wrestling with Scripture on these matters. That's the nature of biblical **interpretation**: we bring our whole self to the interpretive task. The more honest we are about these personal factors, the more we can control them.

As I look back, a decisive factor **for me**, when I stood at this interpretational crossroads some years ago was, bottom line, **What do I believe about God, the God of love and justice**. Here's how I framed it: (again, for me) What do I fear more when I stand before God in that day of days?

That God will say to me, Duane, why didn't you do more to call sin sin and keep the church pure and keep the world out?

Or that God will say to me, Duane, why didn't you do more to help my queer children who were suffering at the hands of the church and society? What about my love for the outsider wasn't clear enough to you?

Bottom line, I fear more the latter for myself. . . and can only throw myself upon the mercy of God for falling so short.

May God guide us all as we seek to discern a better way.

A video recording of the 2/26/2023 presentation of this Testimony at Neland Church will be available at vimeo.com/nelandchurch and the Neland Ave CRC <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAw5mMCCmL4>

* Reference for early translations of *arsenokoitai*:

<https://www.forgeonline.org/blog/2019/3/8/what-about-romans-124-27>