



FIFTH AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Is Same-Sex Marriage *Christian* Marriage?

Leviticus 20:13 • First Corinthians 13:1-7 • 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8

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Leviticus 20:13

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Thessalonians 2:5-8

~~⁵As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; ⁶nor did we seek praise from mortals; whether from you or from others; ⁷though we might have made demands as apostles~~ of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. ⁸So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

Today, this church engages a larger conversation taking place across our culture and in many other American churches. It is a subject about which we do not all agree. It is a subject on which some in the Church wish their preachers would stay silent.

I get that. I am sympathetic to those who want to keep peace in the family, and I certainly have no desire to kick a beehive just to see what happens. That said, I think we need to talk about same-sex marriage.

We need to talk about it, because staying silent won't help. We need to talk about it, because discussing the moral issues of the day falls squarely in the Church's wheelhouse. It's what we do. We need to talk about it, because we have things to contribute to the wider conversation, and—dare I suggest—“light” to shine on the matter. We need to talk about it, because we all need to learn how to engage on issues over which we disagree without demonizing each other. We need to love each other in and through conversations like this, because that is the way of Christ.

That brings me a crucially important truth: **What binds people together as the Church is *not* mental agreement.**

You already know this, but it bears repeating: We do not all believe the same things about God, or the world, or politics, or why the snow on the Upper East Side didn't get plowed this past week. The same was true for the disciples. The disciples didn't believe the same things. They didn't share the same hopes for Jesus. They argued all the time. It's right there in the New Testament. Peter and Paul—saints of the church—did not agree on who could follow Jesus.

So if the disciples didn't agree on major stuff—like who belongs in church and who doesn't—what holds the Church together? The answer, of course, is Jesus.

You have been to parties. You have looked around and thought, “I don't know if I would enjoy talking with most of the people in this room. I am only here because I like the host and he invited me.” That, my friends, is church. And that's Jesus, too.

From the very beginning, Jesus pulled people out of their cozy cubbyholes and tossed them together in communities of uncomfortable, almost prickly diversity. Our Lord tapped fishermen and soldiers, tax collectors and bandits, seamstresses and harlots, shepherds and magi, all sorts of people who would never grab a beer together at the local pub, and asked them to sit down and eat together, talk together.

Jesus, it turns out, didn't care about their differences of lifestyle or political party or economic status or a person's spot on the social register. The Apostle Paul reflects this when he writes: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

Our tradition is clear. What draws us together is not something so tidy as agreement; it is Jesus. He did it then, and he does it now. Jesus is forever sitting us down alongside people who are not like us—people who do not agree with us—and then asking us to love them.

Admittedly, that's not an easy assignment. I know it. You know it. I got a nasty email on Friday about today's sermon topic. In about 30 seconds my mind generated 10 responses—none of them very kind. Being gentle and humble and calm in the middle of a difficult conversation goes against our instincts; and yet, my friends, it is the call of Christ. We are called to love in spite of differing opinions, to love our enemies, to love through controversy, and—yes—to love when every synapse in our brain wants to unleash an Armageddon of snark.

It is not a cushy assignment, although given all the conflict in the world around us, what could be more important—more Christian—than shouldering this challenge?

With that in mind, I have one final thought before proceeding with the topic at hand. I am preaching on this subject today because a number of you asked me to share my personal thoughts on this issue. I am honored to do this. I do so as part of the wider dialogue happening in our church around this issue. I do not, however, expect to change anybody's mind this morning. Really.

Human sexuality has been the hot-button issue for North American Christians for the past 40 years. Over the course of my adult life, and in my service as an ordained minister, I have been in countless conversations on this topic. In all of these discussions, I have never—not once—witnessed someone grab a panelist or a preacher or a speaker or me to say, "You just changed my mind on this subject!" It doesn't work that way.

I am not saying that we are incapable of change. Yet when it comes to controversial issues, we do so slowly. We take our time, because these issues are inherently complicated. We take our time, because these questions raise other important questions—lots of them! We take our time, because we sense that so much is at stake—maybe even the gospel itself—and that's precisely why we must engage these issues.

So, this morning, as part of a conversation that has been going on around this church in recent months, I want to offer you my perspective. I want to tell you what I think and how I got there. At the same time, I want to honor this pulpit by offering the thoughts and hopes I speak here to God. So please pray with me:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Without further preamble, in considering the question, "Is same-sex marriage Christian marriage?", I have concluded, "Yes, it can be."

How did I come to this conclusion?

I do not think that I had much of an opinion about human sexuality until I was in junior high. In junior high, we had compulsory gym, and while the gym teacher would have hauled you out of the locker room and down to the principal's office for making a racial slur, he stood by and smiled while boys tried to outdo each other making crude comments about sexual orientation.

It was about that time that someone in my home church, First Presbyterian Church of Mora, Minnesota, decided that the youth group needed to see a film that was making the rounds. The film was about homosexuality. The general premise of the movie was that the gay lifestyle (this was well before LGBT became accepted nomenclature) was a creeping evil.

Gay people, the narrator asserted, are not like “normal” people. They don’t want to be like “normal” people; instead, they plan to infuse the rest of society with their corrupt ways. The images the filmmaker used to back up these claims shocked my 14-year-old sensibilities and shaped my earliest impressions of what it meant to be gay.

Seven years later, my world shifted. I was sitting across from my college roommate of three years, Mark. Choking back tears, he told me that he was gay. It was an awkward and powerful moment in a friendship that is now in its 30th year. The awkwardness probably peaked when he said, “Scott, I have felt this way my entire life... you know, attracted to men.” Then, glancing at my face, he quickly added, “But of course, I’ve never felt that way toward you.” I wasn’t sure whether I should feel relieved or offended. It’s taken me years to work through my reactions to that comment!

As Mark explained his struggle to come to grips with his true self, this youngest son of a Lutheran pastor shared his worry that he would never again be welcome in a church. His concern made my heart ache. Nobody in the world could be further from the images that I had seen in that awful movie than Mark.

Clearly, I needed to think this matter through.

Already a religion major, I began to study the Biblical texts that dealt with this issue. Now, as people on all sides of the current debate are quick to point out, there are not many passages in Scripture that talk about same-sex relations. There is no mention of homosexuality in the four gospels. Jesus does not weigh in on the matter.

Still, there are seven passages in the Bible that are usually referenced in these discussions. What about these passages?

Many scholars find these texts to be of dubious help in answering contemporary questions about human sexuality. Why? Because the majority of these passages do not talk about what we are trying to talk about this morning—consensual relationships between adults. Instead, these texts condemn sexual violence (Sodom and Gomorrah), and in the New Testament they usually condemn abuses perpetrated by powerful men against minors and slaves.

“What about Paul’s comments in Romans?” others respond, “That sounds potentially consensual.” Yes, it does. The point and counterpoint in these debates goes on and on.

In the midst of it, though, I got hooked on another question: How do we use the Bible? What sort of authority is it? Is it a rule book? Is it something else? If we fail to follow all the statutes in the Good Book, will we fall under the judgment of God?

Thinking this over, I grappled, as so many do, with the fact that the Bible has so many different rules in it. There are legal codes in Scripture that come from a number of different cultures over a long span of history. No one can follow all these rules. It is literally impossible. Some are contradictory. Some get overturned later in Scripture. All of us focus on some of the rules found in the Bible and not others.

A person recently said to me, “Scott, I love my gay hairdresser, but I still hold with the passage from Leviticus that says his lifestyle is an abomination.” I asked her if she planned on stoning him anytime soon, and she laughed, “Well, of course not, I don’t take that part literally.” Interesting, right? Why lift up the first part of the verse as accurate and not the second? I think I know why. She was doing what we all do—picking and choosing—trying to piece together a faith that makes sense.

In this country, we don’t stone rebellious teenagers, as Deuteronomy commands.² In this church, we don’t ban women from entering the sanctuary during their menstrual cycles, as Leviticus orders.³ Heck, we don’t prohibit women from speaking in church or teaching in church, as Paul instructs.⁴ And then there’s hair. That’s right, hair!

Did you know that there are more passages in Scripture that speak about the appropriate length of women’s hair and the trimming of men’s beards than there are texts about same-sex relations? In First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes that if women do not wear veils in public, they should shave off all their hair.⁵ Or take

the book of Leviticus, which, for all of you clean-shaven chaps out there, orders men to refrain from trimming their beards.⁶

I am not talking about hair to be silly. There are places in the world today where veils and beards are taken very seriously indeed. This raises yet another crucial question: Why don't we care about hair commands in the Bible? How do we know when the ethical regulations in the Bible are to be honored in the modern world, and how do we know when those commandments are inessential bits of cultural baggage? How do we know what God really cares about?

The Protestant reformers—John Calvin and Martin Luther—grappled with this very issue. They were not fundamentalists. They argued that we need to exercise care, skill and love when interpreting the Bible. The primary purpose of the Bible, in Luther and Calvin's thinking, was not to establish a set of laws. Instead, Scripture exists—first and foremost—to put us in conversation with God, and more precisely to introduce us to Jesus. The Bible is the Word of God, because through it we come face to face with *the* Word of God—Jesus.⁷

This was something of a revelation for me. The official Biblical canon includes the 66 books that Christians call the Bible. At the same time, the reformer Martin Luther argued, we all have “a canon within the canon.”⁸ Everyone has favorite verses or touchstones in the Bible. Everyone finds a core in scripture. Yet, for Christians, Luther argued, the “canon within the canon” has got to be Jesus. Jesus is the lens through which we view the rest of the Bible—through which we read all of Scripture.

After traveling with reformers for a bit, I felt like I had a new perspective on how the Bible could inform the matter before us.⁹ What if the church is compelled to focus on Jesus as we try to figure out what to say about same-sex marriage? What role does Jesus' warning, “Do not judge, lest you be judged,” have to play?¹⁰ What was his relationship to the law? How could his preaching and teaching on the love of God focus our discussion?

As I considered this new trajectory, I began to ask myself a pretty basic question: “What is Christian marriage?” We could spend a whole day on this issue alone. So here are a few quick things that leapt out at me: First—going back to the Bible—it is not clear in the New Testament that the Apostle Paul marriage thinks is a good idea for Christians. Second, down through human history, marriage has been primarily defined by a culture's civil laws and regulations. In this, religious texts have often taken a backseat to property law: “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

Still, there is important stuff about marriage to be gleaned from the Bible. In Malachi, for example, marriage is described as a covenant—a set of promises made between a man and a woman creating a lasting bond between the two.

When I sit in my office to do pre-marital counseling, this is precisely the sort of thing that we talk about. We talk about the love that these two individuals have for each other, and we talk about the lasting covenantal promises that they will make to each other on their wedding day. “For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long we both shall live.”

In these conversations, it is my responsibility to assess whether a couple really desires a Christian wedding—a Christian marriage. Do they intend to pursue the sort of love the Apostle describes in First Corinthians?

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

If a couple embraces this sort of love—this sort of ethic—as a lifelong pursuit, then I am happy to perform their wedding. That's also why, in answering today's question, “Is same-sex marriage Christian marriage?”, I respond, “It *can* be.” I don't assume that all, or even most, same-sex couples want a Christian marriage. Yet when a couple is eager to make binding promises before God and to pursue this sort of sacrificial love for a lifetime, then I believe we as the Church must figure out how to bless them.

On a side note, some claim that same-sex marriage will contribute to the breakdown of the nuclear family in this country. Honestly, I have to say that I have seen no compelling facts to support this assertion. There are many issues leading to instability in American families. The most statistically significant are high divorce rates and absentee fathers—both of which lead to challenging economic conditions for women raising children. Neither of these things can be pinned on the door of the LGBT community.

For pity's sake, the lesbian couple who lived next door to Amy and me in Austin, Texas, were the cornerstone of our neighborhood! They worked at IBM, kept their house neat as a pin, adopted a little girl, barbecued on the Fourth of July and were about as apple-pie-American as it gets. I point this out, because advocating for same-sex marriage is, in many ways, a conservative position. Really. In terms of the larger society, conservative thinkers have consistently argued that human relationships ought to be ordered through the institution of marriage.

This is why Ted Olson, a Republican attorney, who argued *Bush v. Gore* before the Supreme Court, joined his rival on that case, Democratic attorney David Boies, to challenge California's ban on same-sex marriages. These two are now working together to challenge Virginia's ban. What gets such an odd couple to join forces? The answer is a concern about basic liberties, yes—but also the belief that committed, loving families are building blocks for a healthy society.

There's so much more to say, but let me close with something that has become personally important to me in the church's ongoing discussions about same-sex relationships.

To do this, I want to turn to the third text listed in today's bulletin—1 Thessalonians. When the Apostle Paul writes to Christians in the bustling city of Thessalonica—a city where he and his sidekicks Silvanus and Timothy planted a church—he writes with great affection. His language practically glows: “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves.”

We shared the gospel, but also our own selves. I love that image! I agree, too. Being a disciple requires more than a profound subject and a ready answer. Ministry is sharing—sharing our lives, our energies and our stories with each other. This is, of course, the gospel. When we needed saving, God didn't send us a textbook; God came. Jesus shared his self with us, for us.

Over the years, I have had conversations with scores of gay and lesbian Christians, and also with the parents and siblings and friends and partners of these individuals. These disciples have shared themselves—their hopes, their fears, their struggles and their joys—with me. Most of what they have shared I recognize as being pretty similar to my own hopes, fears, struggles and joys.

Most, but not all.

You see, in these conversations it has become clear that these individuals and couples—in trying to live out their faith in the church—have had to endure things that I have never had to endure. In movies that caricature their lives, in uncaring comments tossed around at coffee hour, in angry diatribes posted on religious blogs, these dear people have been persecuted.

What completely floors me, however, is that these individuals have continued coming to church, continued serving Meals on Wheels, continued singing in the choir, playing the organ, delivering flowers, visiting the sick. They have continued ministering.

Why? The answer I have heard—again and again, usually in quiet tones—is, “Because I love the church—the body of Christ.”

I have a friend who detests reading movie reviews in a certain Christian magazine because the reviewer seems to find a Christ figure in every film. I don't mind it so much. Mostly because I, too, am on a perpetual search for Christ figures.

In writing today's sermon, I didn't need to look very far.

Those of you who are gay or lesbian and have stayed in the Church as we have fumbled and fumed and tried to figure out whether God messed up while creating you, I want you to know that I am personally humbled and inspired by you. In standing by the Church, in staying faithful to this flawed institution even as you have been persecuted, you have demonstrated a love that I can only call Christ-like.

You, my friends, have modeled the sacrificial love of our Lord to me.

We are a better Church, a more beautiful Church, a more gracious Church because you are among us. When the day comes, and I suspect it will come fairly soon, that the Presbyterian Church allows its clergy to exercise pastoral discretion in marrying all who want to order their relationships according to Christ's love, be assured I will welcome you into my office for that conversation and into this sanctuary for that ceremony.

For those of you who will struggle with that choice, don't worry; you are welcome in my office, too. Come by, we'll get a cup of tea, and we'll talk. We'll invite a few of the same-sex couples in the congregation to join us. Nobody will bite each other. I promise. We'll share the gospel and our selves, as the Good Book instructs; and we will trust that the love of Christ is big enough to hold onto us and eventually to welcome us all home.

Footnotes

¹ In the words of *The Confession of 1967*:

God the Holy Spirit fulfills the work of reconciliation in us. The Holy Spirit creates and renews the church as the community in which people are reconciled to God and to one another. The Holy Spirit enables us to receive forgiveness as we forgive one another, and to enjoy the peace of God as we make peace among ourselves. In spite of our sin, God gives us the power to become representatives of Jesus Christ and his gospel of reconciliation.

² Deuteronomy 21:18-21

³ Leviticus 15

⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:34

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:6-15

⁶ Leviticus 19:7

⁷ Our historical confessions and creeds repeatedly emphasize this point: *The Scots Confession*, Chapters XVIII and XIX; *The Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapters I and II; *The Westminster Confession*, Chapter I; *The Shorter Catechism*, Questions 89 and 90; *The Declaration of Barmen*, 8.10-12; and *The Confession of 1967*, 9.27-30

⁸ See Michael Rogness, "A Canon Within the Canon: Yes, Preach Christ!" in *Word and World*, Luther Seminary, 2006, p. 436, for a helpful discussion of Luther's thought on the matter.

⁹ See Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Westminster/John Knox, 1994) for a thorough discussion of reformed interpretation of Scripture, including "The Order of Love."

¹⁰ Matthew 7:1 and Luke 6:37

