

WE CAN WORK IT OUT

Lennon and McCartney

**A short series of Bible Studies exploring
The Bible, marriage and sexuality**

Mark Dunn-Wilson



Does the Bible have a clear and unequivocal teaching on matters of gender, sexuality and marriage? How can people engage seriously with Scripture and yet seemingly reach very different conclusions?

Having identified key Biblical passages used by those who espouse a traditional view of marriage and sexuality, we will explore them together with the benefit of biblical scholars from across the theological spectrum.

Study 1 How on earth did we get to believe *that*?

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and, in all things, charity.”

Rupertus Meldenius

1.1 A ‘precap’

Early in 2019, I watched online as the (now, somewhat ironically named) United Methodist Church, publicly demonstrated their division, disagreement and distrust. It committed itself to a path that seemed likely to lead to ‘mutually (over) assured’ destruction as two sides of a debate ensured that compromise and conciliation were voted off the table. The Special Conference was meeting in St. Louis, Missouri to consider how the UMC should respond to the issue of same-sex marriage in the church: a split seemed inevitable then and seems hardly less so now.

And, I will be honest with you, I wept. I wept, partly because of the hurt and sadness that was on display; partly because it should always grieve the heart when Christian Communities fail to display compassion and live in unity: but partly because I feared that in a few short months, the Methodist Church in this country might well set itself on a similar path.

For those of you that do not know me well, perhaps I should say that I am not a newcomer to the Methodist family. I am in fact the fourth successive generation of Methodist Ministers: my father, grandfather and great grandfather were Methodist presbyters before me. My mother has, since my own ordination, been ordained as a Methodist Presbyterian too. On my Mum’s side, the family line is littered with local preachers and on Dad’s side, we can trace a bright succession of Methodist preachers going right back to the early days of Methodism.

Methodism is in my DNA

I realise that this is a topic that goes far beyond the Methodist Church, and I hope that as the studies develop that whatever your heritage, there will be something of benefit – but my starting place is firmly within the Methodist family. It seems to me that there are very few areas left that could split our denomination – but the issue of sexuality and same-sex marriage is one of them. There are deeply held convictions – often long established, and often shaped and coloured by personal experience – and there is always the possibility that those convictions lead to entrenched positions from which it is hard to develop gracious conversations.

And, I think there needs to be a gracious conversation.

And I am not ready to allow our polarised positions to demolish a denomination which still has Kingdom work to do. These studies are my contribution to encouraging difficult, gracious conversations amongst us.

- So, my target group for these studies are those of us whose position could be summarised by ‘There is no conversation to have: because the Bible is quite clear on the matter’
- My other target group is those of us whose position is ‘You’re making a mountain out of a mole hill – of course we should agree to marry people of the same sex in Church. I don’t know what all the fuss is about.’

- Oh, and there is a third target group too: everybody else who position themselves somewhere in the middle.

I hope that these studies are for all of us.

The title of the series comes of course from a song by Lennon and McCartney that I rediscovered as I was beginning to plan these studies some months ago: and comes out of my longing to find a godly, gracious way to hold together in Christ with integrity in these matters.

Life is very short, and there's no time
For fussing and fighting, my friend.
I have always thought that it's a crime,
So I will ask you once again.

Try to see it my way,
Only time will tell if I am right or I am wrong.
While you see it your way
There's a chance that we may fall apart before too long.
We can work it out,

Songwriters: John Lennon / Paul McCartney

We can work it out. To which I have added a large question mark!

So, let me tell you what I hope to do over the next three Studies.

We will start by underlining how vital Scripture must be in this discussion and how we use Scripture to guide us. We will trace how Scripture has been faithfully interpreted by God's people over the whole life of the Church.

Our second Study will begin to look at those key Bible passages which are often brought out to inform our positions, in the Old and New Testaments.

Then in the third Study, we will try to discern if there is a clear and consistent view of Biblical Marriage. And if there is, how does a marriage between two people of the same sex have the potential to either meet that understanding, and where -if anywhere- does it fall short?

There is a lot of ground to cover – and you may well be thinking 'just get on with it' and I will. But I need to share with you just a little of my story before I do.

1.2 A long time in the making

A pilgrimage of faith

I am editing these studies on the 25th Anniversary of my Ordination and I recall that it nearly didn't happen! I almost left the Methodist ministry before I started.

Conference was meeting in Derby in 1993 and amongst the items on the Agenda was an attempt to establish a policy with regard to gay and lesbian people, particularly in relation to ordained ministry in the Methodist Church. I was convinced that if Conference determined that such inclusion was acceptable for those who practiced their sexuality, then I would feel obliged to leave the denomination. In the event,

following last minute interventions from a group including the late Donald English, Conference resolved to consider the matter pastorally rather than legally and found a form of words which both affirmed the traditional teaching of the church *and*, at the same time, affirmed the contribution of gay and lesbian people to the life of the church. Schism was avoided, and this Conservative Evangelical Minister remained in Connexion.

But that experience began a journey for me – one on which I still travel.

And over the last 25 or so years, I have encountered all kinds of people with all kinds of gifts and all kinds of theology. I have been challenged by the pastoral realities of circuit life (it's always much harder to hold dogmatic theological positions, when those 'positions' have names and faces and hopes and fears looking back at you from them!). I have been challenged by the evidence of God using people of different theological persuasions than my own in some powerful kingdom ways: and I have grappled with the reality of gay and lesbian ministers in our Connexion, who are good faithful Ministers, have been loyal and faithful colleagues and who, most importantly, undeniably love Jesus.

Methodist Conference has returned to the matters of sexuality and relationships several times since 1993 and of course the expectation and eventual reality of the redefinition of marriage in this country in 2014 has meant inevitably – and rightly - that we have issues to face, discuss and resolve going forward. How is the Methodist Church to respond to the reality of same-sex marriage in the UK? And for me that is the key point. We are not discussing if the definition of marriage should be revised for that decision has already been made at Government level. We are concerned with how the Methodist Church should respond to that change.

At every point in my ministry, I have tried to stay faithful to my commitment to go on a pilgrimage of faith with 'the people called Methodist' as we seek God's will in that matter as a Connexion, and more latterly, to work out what my own theological position is in relation to my mission in context, here at Truro. The Church here declares – and has done so for many years – that 'All are Welcome Here'. But what does that welcome look like when it comes to matters of same sex marriage?

During my Ministry, in Liverpool years ago and during my 13 years and counting, here in Cornwall, I have been pleased to be the Minister to gay men and lesbian women, transgender people, folk in the process of transitioning and so many others. It has been my privilege. But the time is coming when an essentially pastoral approach will probably need to be qualified by a settled, legal position in the Methodist Church. And when that time comes, it will affect my ministry; your ministry; the local church; the Methodist Church; the Christian Church; your home community, my home community and most importantly, it will affect those who lives are directly impacted by the decisions we will be asked to make.

And for some, the outcomes will be perceived as positive and for others, those same outcomes – whatever they turn out to be - will feel negative. And things will never be the same. It's that important.

But here is my stumbling block. Although I may not be quite as theologically Conservative as I was back then in 1993, I am still an evangelical. I still believe, as Clause 4 of the Methodist Deed of Union states:

“The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.”

As an evangelical, I hold to the position that my theology is shaped by Scripture and not by the world around me. There are some who would not take that position – and that is OK. But for me, on my journey, if my conclusion is that Scripture teaches that same-sex unions are not countenanced by God (or whatever other phrase you want to use) - then I cannot subscribe to them either. I do not believe that the beliefs of the Church should simply be swept along by the prevailing winds of culture: in fact, I believe that often the duty of the Church is to be counter-cultural; to swim against the prevailing tide. And so, the most important part of my pilgrimage in this matter has been to go back to Scripture and try to understand what God wants me to know.

Am I a Bible scholar? No, I am not: not in any real sense. I am just an ordinary Christian, with a bit of training, a lot of books, a little time to read them: and with a whole lot of determination to try to understand what God is saying to me through Scripture. So, what we are going to get in these studies is a lot of other people's wisdom; scholars, far more capable than Mark Dunn-Wilson who have brought that wisdom to passages of scripture and shared a conversation with me. And, if you choose to see these studies through to their end – then I am simply inviting you to eavesdrop on the conversations that we've been having over the years.

I will do my utmost to make that conversation balanced: because my expectation is not to change your mind, but perhaps to open it to a viewpoint you may not have previously considered. Minds, like parachutes, work more effectively, when open.

I want to encourage gracious, difficult conversations. And I want to enable theological reflection.

I do not expect you to agree with everything you will read – in fact, *I* don't expect to agree with everything I am writing! But I hope to provide us with some tools to help us pray into, discuss and consider these challenging matters. Those closest to me know that these are the hardest series of studies I have every set myself to produce – because I know that for all kinds of different reasons, many people have already invested a lot of themselves into this area: and that for many there is but a thin place between firmly held conviction, personal experience, a sense of right and wrong: and inevitably emotions are never far from the surface.

We will be focussing on Scripture – and in doing so, we understand that this is only part of the discussion: there are contributions to be made by scientists, anthropologists, psychologists and all manner of other 'ists'! But I hope that what is offered here will help, if like me you are wanting to engage with the discussion without rejecting a focus on what the Bible teaches.

1.3 It all comes down to Scripture

So, where do we begin?

Well folk, if you've been around my teaching or preaching for a while then you will recognise my starting point: because it is the same place every time. What are the three questions that we need to bring to any passage of Scripture if we are seeking to discern God's purpose for us from it? You've heard this so often before.

We begin with the text: (what the Bible actually says) and then we ask.....

Question 1: What did it mean then?

Question 2: What does it mean now?

Question 3: What difference does it make?

It saysthis.

So what does it mean in its original context? Has the context changed – and if it has, what do the principles of that text mean to us now? And finally, how does that help us discern what God is saying to us, so that we can live faithfully in his word.

As the Study material (Remaining Faithful) produced by Methodist Evangelicals Together reminds us:

“We need to discern with the greatest care what the Bible says about marriage and how that might shape our current thinking”.¹

and of course, that discernment about marriage in this context, needs to include a discernment about same-sex marriage.

In 1998 Methodist Conference accepted a report called '*A Lamp for my Feet and A light to my path*' – with the rather snappy subheading: '*The nature of authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church*'.² This remains a key part of our understanding of Scripture as Methodists and its authority in guiding our faith tradition.

In the preface, the statement begins:

“How does God speak to us through the pages of the Bible? Do we all hear his voice in the same way? How does the Bible guide our thinking and our actions? Methodists answer these questions in a variety of ways.”³

And I am sure that amongst those reading these Studies, we will have different ways of understanding the authority of Scripture, how we interpret Scripture and indeed the nature of Scripture itself. For me, I believe that the whole of Scripture is the Word of God: I have never sat comfortably alongside those who argue that it 'contains' the Word of God and our task is to determine which bits are of God and which bits can safely be set on one side. Such an approach gives the reader (me – in this case) far too much responsibility! No, for me The Bible 'is' the Word of God and the Holy Spirit interprets and illuminates it for us, so that the written word can become the Living Word. I have always tried to grapple with Scripture – especially the bits I find hardest to understand - rather than try and take responsibility for choosing which bits are authentically of God and which bits aren't. I'm not sure that that makes life easier – but equally, I'm not sure that is really the point!

Obviously, we know that the 66 books of the Bible are written by a large number of people (all men?), over a significant number of years; in many different locations. There are different styles of writing: some historical, some poetic, some prophetic and a whole lot in between. We know that the Scriptures that we have today have been copied many, many times over, from manuscripts which have sometimes been incomplete and have never been 'originals' – and yet, I am convinced that the words that we have, accurately reflect what God wants us to receive.

¹ Remaining Faithful: Marriage and Methodism

² A Lamp for my feet and a light to my path'

³ A Lamp for my feet and a light to my path

I have a high view of Scripture. And for me that is really important when it comes to grappling with passages around marriage and sexual orientation and behaviour. I am simply not prepared to dismiss Scripture as inconvenient; inaccurate or irrelevant. But, neither am I prepared to approach Scripture with theological lethargy. I can open my Bible and read what it says: but for me, that is the start of the journey, not the end. That just gets me to the start line: to the point where we can ask Question 1: *‘What did it mean then?’*

When we seek to apply God’s Word to our lives and our living, part of the discernment process is to invite the Holy Spirit to help us interpret what it means, as well as use our eyes to read what it says.

And as the Methodist report ‘A Lamp for my Feet’ states:

“The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters”⁴

Christians have always sought to understand God’s Word for the time in which they live and interpreted it to illuminate contemporary experiences, questions and situations. And, I have come to the place where I believe that grasping that fact is a key tool, in our engagement with difficult theological, social, cultural and scriptural questions like the ones we will consider later in this series.

It is not enough to say, *‘It says here’* we need also to wrestle with the *‘and what did it mean then and what does it mean today?’* questions too.

And I guess that is the first point where some of us will part company. So, I invite you to hang on in there with an open mind, because this is so important that I am going to suggest to you that it has always been the case.

1.4 A COMMUNITY OF INTERPRETERS

“The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters.”⁵

Let’s see how that ‘community of interpreters’ has gone about their work during the life of the Christian Church.

1.4.1 The Spirit as a catalyst

It’s around AD 50 in Jerusalem and there is one hell of an argument going on.

Acts 15:5-22 (NIV2011)

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, *“The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”*⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: *“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”*¹² The whole assembly became silent as they

⁴ A Lamp for my feet and a light to my path

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⁵ A Lamp for my feet and a light to my path

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listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶ " 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things'— ¹⁸ things known from long ago. ¹⁹ "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

What is going on there?

The early Church are fully aware what the Law of Moses (Scripture) says and yet, they are interpreting the ancient teaching for a contemporary and changing situation and applying the teaching in a new way.

What does it say? Everyone should be circumcised.

What did it mean then? Circumcision was an outward demonstration of the commitment of the heart of the people and an acceptance by God

What does it mean now: Clearly these people are accepted by God because they have received the Holy Spirit?

What difference does it make? Let's not make it harder for them to join God's family than it needs to be. Let's tell them that they don't need to be circumcised (because that's not relevant to them), but we will tell them that they do need to refrain from eating food sacrificed to idols (because in their context, that is still an important public witness)

Now, were the Apostles throwing Scripture out because they were applying it differently? Were they disrespecting their heritage? Of course, they weren't: but they were interpreting Scripture for a new situation and asking the question, 'What does it mean now?'

They reinterpreted Scripture in the light of a movement from God to draw people into fellowship by the Holy Spirit.

If they had stopped at the '*but it says here*' moment then gentleman, maybe you would have been a little different than perhaps you are! Just one example

"The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters."

1.4.2 Science as a catalyst

Here's an example of reinterpretation and application in the light of scientific discovery.

For centuries there was absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the earth was fixed at the centre of the universe and the sun revolved around it.

Joshua 10.13

¹³ *So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies,*

as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day.

Ecclesiastes 1:4-5

⁴ Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. ⁵ The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

Psalms 93:1

¹ The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed in majesty and armed with strength; indeed, the world is established, firm and immovable.

The earth at the centre, the sun moving around us. Convinced? Of course, you're not. And the reason that you're not is because someone invented the telescope and some bloke called Galileo borrowed it. And proved that the sun was the centre and the earth moved around it.

And yet 100 years before, Copernicus had proposed the same theory and was condemned by Luther as a 'fool' and Melancon, the great Reformation Theologian recommended '*severe measures*' be taken to silence all those who dared to agree with Copernicus, in order to '*preserve the truth as revealed by God*'. Copernicus was dismissed as 'heretical'.

In 1663 Galileo was tried and found to be guilty of being '*formally heretical*' because, it was argued, his theory '*explicitly contradicts sentences found in many places of Sacred Scripture according to the plain and proper meaning of the words*'

'*It says here*' they said.

And yet no one today would give a moment's credence to anyone who claimed that was what was meant by those words today, because we have allowed our scientific understanding to colour our interpretation and application of Scripture. And was that reinterpretation dismissive of Scripture? Did it cause Christians to throw their Bibles away? Of course it didn't.

It simply clarified our understanding of Scripture.

"The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters."

1.4.3 Human rights as a catalyst

So, The Council of Jerusalem reinterpreted Scripture in response to a movement of God's Spirit in drawing into the Kingdom those who had previously been excluded.

The theories of Copernicus and Galileo caused a reinterpretation of Scripture in response to scientific advances and knowledge.

We're not done yet.

How did we get to the point where the Church today universally condemns slavery and works to end it, when Scripture '*clearly*' condones the buying and keeping of slaves even in Christian households?

After the Israelites had fled Egypt they were given the Mosaic Law which allowed them to make slaves of Hebrews and foreigners. The Israelites were allowed to buy slaves from the nations around them and keep

them indefinitely as slaves (Leviticus 25. 44-46) And even if the conditions softened in the New Testament, there is absolutely no suggestion that slavery should be ended because it was contrary to God's will.

Ephesians 6:5-9

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. ⁹ And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

This and other texts were enough to allow the Church to sit comfortably with the idea of slavery right through to 1807 when William Wilberforce finally managed to force a change. Incidentally John Wesley's last letter was to Wilberforce encouraging him to keep up his efforts to end the slave trade.

Now surely, no Christian today would argue that slavery is ordained by God: and if they did, then they would be roundly and rightly condemned. But why not? Because it *'says so here'*!

And, as church, we have come to the place (kicking and screaming it must be said in the late C18th and early C19th) where our understanding of the value of every human being as a child of God has caused us to reinterpret our long-held understanding of Scripture. As the moral compass changes, so our understanding of God's will and purpose has changed too.

Have we thrown away Scripture because we now don't insist on the keeping of slaves? Of course we haven't. But our growing understanding of human rights and the theology of human creation has clarified our understanding of Scripture.

"The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters."

What does it say? But then.....

- Question 1: What did it mean then?
- Question 2: What does it mean now?
- Question 3: What difference does it make?

1.4.4 Gender equality as a catalyst

Ladies, hands up if you have ever sung out loud in Church?

Or held an office or job where you have instructed or been boss over a man?

Failed to wear a hat in worship?

But *"it says here"*:

1 Corinthians 14:34-36

³⁴ Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask

their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. ³⁶ Or did the word of God originate with you?

1 Timothy 2:12-14 (NIV2011)

¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

So how did we get to the point where ladies no longer have to wear hats and do get to speak? And in most traditions (including the Methodist Church which is the context for these studies) there are women teachers, preachers, ministers, Chairs of District and even Presidents of Conference three years on the trot!!?

We are where we are because we asked our Questions.

What did it mean then?

- and we discovered that in all probability women were told be silent because they had been isolated from teaching for so long that they didn't know what they were talking about: and incidentally uncovered hair was a sign that you were a hooker back in the day and that was a little unsettling at communion: so better show you've changed your way of life

And what does it mean now?

- Well not the same as back then clearly!

So we can reinterpret Scripture for a new circumstance. And a sense of equality and inclusion and partnership and a recognition of gifting, and over time we have become more and more comfortable with understanding these passages in a different way.

And most of us wouldn't think of saying: '*But it says here...*' and believing that the argument can just be left there as if every question has been answered and every possible interpretation and application exhausted!

1.4.5 Social change as a catalyst

And I haven't even got to divorce yet where '*it says*' (in the mouth of Jesus no less)

Mark 10:11-12 (NIV2011)

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

'*But it says here....*'!

"The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters."

- Interpreting Scripture in the light of a movement of God's Spirit including those who were previously excluded. (the Gentiles)
- Interpreting Scripture in the light of scientific advances (the earth and the sun and the telescope)
- Interpreting Scripture in the light of a deepening understanding of human rights and the unique worth of every individual (slavery)
- Interpreting Scripture in the light of equal value regardless of gender (women in church and in leadership)

- Interpreting Scripture in the light of social change (which brings us to the point where many Christians can comfortably, if sadly, disregard the words of Jesus concerning divorce)

Did any of those examples (and there are many, many more) mean that the Church just threw Scripture out?

Did any of those examples result in the rejection of Scripture?

Or did a changing situation, a movement of the Spirit, developing understanding, a cultural shift make the case that Christians to re-consider long held interpretations of Scripture?

Why am I saying this? I'm saying it because I want to get over the idea as clearly as I can that although we must start with what the Scripture says in the various versions and translations that we have (and I really believe that!), we just cannot finish there. We have to ask Questions 1, 2 and 3 as well!

And if I had just jumped into what some might think are controversial texts about homosexuality then we might not be ready to open our minds to revisiting things we have always understood in one stubborn and particular way. So, I am trying to show that we can come to Scripture and seek truth from and beyond the words on the page without throwing Scripture away – because we are seeking the truth behind the words; the divine application of words. We are seeking to remain faithful to Scripture whilst interpreting texts careful and properly for our time.

“The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters.”

Study 1: Summary

Now, I'm nearly done for Study 1: and I am totally aware that I have hardly mentioned marriage and not mentioned same- sex marriage at all. We will get there next time.

- But what I have tried to do in this Study, is to lay some foundations for the tough stuff that is to come: to offer some tools which we can use over the next couple of studies and which you can use in your own prayers and ponderings.
- I have tried to share with you just a little of my own journey – my personal pilgrimage of faith –and to affirm that for me (though I know, not for everyone) Scripture has primary place in the working out of my faith and the shaping of my theology.
- But I have also tried to illustrate that faithful interpretation and application of Scripture requires so much more than simply a *'This is what it says...'* approach. If that was the 'be-all-and-end all', then none of us would need scholars to help us beyond those who translate the original texts into languages that we can understand. But there *are* questions beyond the *'This is what it says...'* that help us towards the *'this is what it means for us today'* position.
- And I have tried to illustrate that interpreting Scripture and wrestling with Divine truth in the light of changing circumstance, changing information and developing understanding, is something that has always been part of our faith heritage – and not some new-fangled idea that the church has come up with in the C21st. That is not to say of course, that every interpretation of Scripture has equal validity – to argue that would be absurd. But it is to underline that careful study and prayerful

reflection can result in an interpretation of Scripture would have seemed very unlikely to those who have gone before.

Over the years, Methodists have held fondly to something called the Epworth Quadrilateral. It is an attempt to understand how we discern God's purpose and truth. The four parts which make up the quadrilateral are these:

- Scripture:
- Reason;
- Tradition
- and Experience – and, so the idea goes, we allow each of those elements to interact together and by holding them in relationship with each other, we can come to a balanced theological understanding.

For me (and I believe for John Wesley before me!), Scripture is of primary importance: and the other three parts cast light on and inform my understanding of Scripture. And all those examples of reinterpretation that I have shared have those elements within the process that brought the change. We do not read scripture in isolation from tradition, reason or experience, for God speaks to us from each part and draws us towards truth. The tradition of the Church (what we have received) needs to be considered; we are supposed to engage our brains as we interact with God (Reason) and we are supposed to live our faith in the real world, in touch with what God is doing. (experience)

And, in our next Study as we turn towards specific texts, then all four parts of the quadrilateral will come back into play. We will look at specific texts and then allow biblical scholars from across the theological and critical spectrum to offer us their understanding, their interpretation of the text that begins with '*But it says here...*'.

Study 2 The danger of unprotected text

Let me be ‘homo unius libri’. (A man of one Book). Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone; only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God: and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach. (John Wesley)⁶

2.1 A Recap

In our first study, I set out my understanding that Scripture is central to my journey as I consider my response to the change in definition of marriage to include same-sex couples in this country.

I hold firmly to Clause 4 of the Methodist Deed of Union which states:

“The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.”

We then explored the phrase from ‘A Light To My Path’ the Methodist Conference report about the authority of scripture, which says

“The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters.”

And then I suggested that in order to be faithful to that idea and to the integrity of Scripture as God’s Word, we needed to come to every passage of Scripture and firstly establish what it says. But then we needed to ask of it:

- Question 1: What did it mean then?
- Question 2: What does it mean now?
- Question 3: What difference does it make?

In the latter part of the first study, we explored how, from the earliest days of the New Testament Church, Christians have reinterpreted and reapplied Scripture for their own context as the Living Word

We considered, the Spirit as a catalyst, as the Council of Jerusalem met in AD 50 and set aside the regulations of circumcision for the gentile church.

We remembered that science too can shape our theological thinking and bring change— as science proved that the earth was not the centre of the universe as had been believed from scripture, but rather the sun.

A growing understanding of human rights enabled Christian belief to shift from the place where it was felt that Scripture condoned slavery, to a place where the church now universally opposes it.

We saw that there were cultural reasons for the silence of women in church that no longer applied – and so now apply Scripture differently in the new context. Finally, we commented that most Christians reluctantly lay aside Jesus words concerning divorce – this time because of social changes.

⁶ Wesley, John

A man of one Book (from Preface to the Sermon)

And I suggested that none of those reinterpretations or reapplications has caused us to throw away scripture, but rather to understand and apply it differently.

Interpreting Scripture and wrestling with Divine truth in the light of changing circumstance, has always been part of our faith heritage and it is therefore not unreasonable to return to our long-held understanding of Scripture and homosexuality, to see if God has something different to teach us from the text.

And it is a return to those texts that we undertake in this our second study.

I hope we are going to come with an open mind as we look at passages of Scripture which are presented as having a bearing on our consideration of homosexuality and therefore on the issues around same-sex marriage. I will present the passages of Scripture and then offer insights from my reading as we consider each of them. Throughout, we will have this question in mind:

‘Does Scripture condemn all same-sex activity?’

But there is a second series of question which we need to hold too.

‘To what extent do the passages we are looking at, inform our debate about committed same-sex relationships?’ What light do they cast on the larger subject we are considering in these studies?

Before we move on, just a word about vocabulary. More often than not, I will use the terms ‘affirming’ and ‘non-affirming’ – by which I mean those who feel able to affirm homosexual people in their relationships and those who feel that the Bible teaches that their relationships cannot be affirmed.

So where shall we begin?

2.2 Genesis 19 – Sodom and Gomorrah

Let’s start with what is surely regarded as one the most technicolour condemnation of homosexual activity in the whole of Scripture.

Genesis chapter 19 records the disturbing story of Sodom and Gomorrah – where even the name of the town has become synonymous with homosexual activity.

Genesis 19:1-13 (NIV2011)

¹ The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² “My lords,” he said, “please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.” “No,” they answered, “we will spend the night in the square.” ³ But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. ⁴ Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. ⁵ They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.” ⁶ Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him ⁷ and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.”

And of course, the story continues with the spectacular destruction of the city.

Now, what was the sin of Sodom which literally brought down the wrath of God on the city?

The respected Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann warns us that:

“unless interpreted carefully, this passage will be taken as support for mistaken theological notions that are uncritical and destructive.and will yield a teaching far remote from the gospel”⁷

So, how do we carefully interpret this story and so avoid simplistic and misleading conclusions?

It is curious, I think that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah remains one of the most cited passages condemning same-sex relationships particularly as,

“for over a thousand years, Jewish theologians never interpreted the passage that way”⁸

The Bible itself casts serious doubt that we are intended to regard the sin of Sodom as having anything at all to do with homosexual acts of any kind!

Isaiah 1.10 and 3.9 suggest we should see the sin as relating to injustice; Jeremiah 23.14 to a variety of irresponsible acts; Ezekiel 16.49, states that the sin is pride.

In the New Testament Jesus mentions Sodom and Gomorrah in Matthew 10 and Luke 10 – and the context is ‘communities that will not make you welcome’! Most other references associate the sin of Sodom with general wrongdoing.

But two reference do perhaps associate the sin with sexual activity.

2 Peter 2:7 (NIV2011)

⁷ and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless

...but certainly, no reference to specific same sex activity.

And then Jude 7 – which is another verse sometimes quoted by non-affirming apologists.

Jude 1:7 (NIV2011)

⁷ In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.

The word translated ‘perversion’ is an interesting one. The KJV has ‘*gone after strange flesh*’.

The Greek is ‘*sarkos heteras*’ (from where we get hetero-sexual of course). It is literally of ‘other’ or ‘different flesh’.

Matthew Vines comments that

“Far from arguing that the men of Sodom pursued flesh too similar to their own, Jude actually indicts them for pursuing flesh that was too different”⁹

⁷ Brueggemann, W.

Genesis

page 163

John Knox Press

⁸ Aelred, P.

To melt a golden calf

page 45

Amazon

⁹ Vines, Matthew

God and the gay Christian

page 69

Convergent Books

The conclusion of many scholars is that in fact Jude suggests that the sin of Sodom was the attempted rape of angels (different flesh) rather than humans!

In the end, the evidence is with Claus Westermann, who expresses the view of many scholars when he states, 'The crime consists in the violation of hospitality'.¹⁰

Listen again:

*But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof
(Genesis 19.8b)*

The two men had come under the protection of Lot and the men of the city violated the most important principles of orderly community when they challenged that protection and tried to abuse the men. Perhaps we should note that Lot did not say: "*Don't do anything to these men, because it would be a same-sex act*". That is just not there!

I contend that it was not because of threatened homosexual sex that the outcry came unto God, but rather in the general principle of that abuse as a betrayal of the rules of hospitality – and therefore has little to say to our musings about homosexuality.

But even if the story is about homosexual activity – it still offers little to any consideration of committed same sex relationships. Brueggemann again:

"It is possible that the offence of Sodom is understood with specific reference to sexuality" That is, the residents of Sodom came to Lot and demanded that they could be given the visiting men so that they could inflict anal intercourse on them."

But,

"the turbulent mood of the narrative suggests gang-rape rather than a private act of sodomy"¹¹

It's not about love: it is about violence.

It's not about intimacy: it is about abuse.

It's not about commitment: it is about short-term violent gratification.

And

'the sexual violence depicted there is utterly contrary to God's intended purposes for love, marriage and sexuality"¹²

Incidentally, we are rightly horrified that Lot tries to ward off the attack of the cities men by offering them his two virgin daughters saying:

Genesis 19:8 (NIV2011)

"Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof."

¹⁰ Westermann, Claus Genesis 12-36

¹¹ Brueggemann, W.

Genesis

page 298

page 164

SPCK

John Knox Press

¹² Achtemeier, Mark

The Bible's 'Yes' to Same-Sex Marriage

page 78

Westminster, John Knox Press

Protecting the male visitors took priority over protecting girls from sexual abuse and gang rape!! What on earth are we supposed to understand from that?

Firstly, we recognise just how serious the violation of hospitality regulations must have been in Lot's context.

Secondly, we are reminded just how undervalued females were in that community. They were considered of lesser worth than men – and I would ask you to file that information away, because that is going to become significant when we come to some of the later passages.

And thirdly, our horror at the proposed treatment of the girls and our disbelief that any parent could behave like that and not face any recriminations, remind us too just how hard it is to simply read words on the pages of Scripture and assume that their context, meaning and application can simply be transferred to our context, situation and culture!

Summary of Genesis 19:

So what do we glean from this passage?

- We note that the judgement of God on Sodom is probably linked to the breaking of hospitality regulations rather than a judgement on homosexual activity – even though some traditionalists try to press it as a proof text.
- Even if God's judgement fell because of homosexual activity, then it was an account of judgement coming on those who sought to commit homosexual gang rape against visiting foreigners – and is therefore surely an irrelevance to our consideration of committed, same sex relationships expressing consensual love.

2.3 Leviticus 18.22; 20.13

“Of all the references to homosexuality in the Bible, two statements in the book of Leviticus raise the most problems. When read alone, and out of context these verses sound unequivocally damning”¹³

They come in chapters 18 and 20 and are part of what has become known as the Holiness Code. In the Code homosexual practice is punishable by death. (18.22 and 20.1)

There are similarities in both passages.

“Both lists deal with the same two general issues, sexual transgressions and sacrifices to Molech although the order of presentation differs.”¹⁴

Leviticus 18:6-26 (NIV2011)

¹⁸ “Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living. ¹⁹ “Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period. ²⁰ “Do not have sexual relations with your neighbour's wife and defile

¹³ Horner. Tom

Jonathan loved David

page 71

Westminster Press

¹⁴ Balentine, Samuel E.

Leviticus

page 155

John Know Press

yourself with her. 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. ²³ “Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion. ²⁴ “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.

Leviticus 20:2-22 (NIV2011)

¹¹ “If a man has sexual relations with his father’s wife, he has dishonoured his father. Both the man and the woman are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. ¹² “If a man has sexual relations with his daughter-in-law, both of them are to be put to death. What they have done is a perversion; their blood will be on their own heads. 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. ¹⁴ “If a man marries both a woman and her mother, it is wicked. Both he and they must be burned in the fire, so that no wickedness will be among you. ¹⁵ “If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he is to be put to death, and you must kill the animal. ¹⁶ “If a woman approaches an animal to have sexual relations with it, kill both the woman and the animal. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. ¹⁷ “If a man marries his sister, the daughter of either his father or his mother, and they have sexual relations, it is a disgrace. They are to be publicly removed from their people. He has dishonoured his sister and will be held responsible. ²² “Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.

What are we to understand from these verses?

We need to note in passing that sacrificing to Molech was a pagan practice that involved the sacrificing of children to appease angry gods – and so, suggests Balentine, is included in the list because it undermines family ties (rather dramatically) in the same way as some of the other sexual offenses like incest would!

Picking a few words here and there, can be made to justify anything – even the smashing of children’s heads against the rocks, which is ‘encouraged’ in the Psalms!¹⁵ However, let’s be clear that despite these dangers, when it comes to a non-affirming position in this discussion, one of the first verses which is always quoted (and it often sounds to me as if it is being shouted, even when written!) is this from Leviticus chapter 18.22

Leviticus 18:22 (NIV2011)

²² “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

...or ‘an abomination’ in the older translations – which, I concede has a much more satisfying visceral tone to it!

So, obviously, we need to spend some time with this verse.

¹⁵ Psalm 137.9

“It is hardly open to doubt’ wrote Derrick Sherwin ‘that both the laws in Leviticus relate to ordinary homosexual acts between men,”¹⁶

Evangelical scholar the late John Stott agrees, supports this position, arguing that

“the plain, natural interpretation of these two verses is that they prohibit homosexual intercourse of every kind”¹⁷

So, there is the non-affirming, conservative justification for giving these verses from Leviticus such weight in the debate. But there is more to say of course.

What do the other commentators say about this passage? Does Stott’s affirmation stand up to broader scholarly scrutiny?

Well, we begin with conservative commentator Roy Gane who seems to agree with Stott and paints a very black and white picture for us – and one with which many non-affirming people will sit comfortably.

He says:

“The language is devastatingly untechnical, leaving no room for ambiguity.”¹⁸

He then goes on to quote Leviticus 20.13 stressing the penalty attached to the homosexual act. ‘They must be put to death’.

Worryingly, I think, he does not, at this stage, even qualify the severity of the penalty by suggesting that this should not be carried out today¹⁹ – but rather simply continues,

“The condemnation of homosexual practice as offensive to God is not ‘politically correct’ today, but our task here is to understand what the Bible says, not to rewrite it”.²⁰

We are grateful then that other conservative commentators take up the challenge of ‘*trying to understand what it says*’ on behalf of Mr Gane – when clearly his primary concern (in this matter only, incidentally) seem to be to repeat what it says, without attempting to actually understand it, which we suggested in our first Study, was both lazy and poor Biblical scholarship.

Trying to make sense of the longer lists of prohibitions, Milgrom (quoted in Balentine), suggests that

“the fundamental issue behind all these prohibitions is the concern to honour God’s procreational commission to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1.28).²¹

God commissions humans to be fruitful and multiply in ways that advance and secure the welfare of human community. Sexual relationships that produce seed destructive of family relationships – adultery, incest – and sexual behaviour that produces no seed – intercourse with menstruating women, male homosexuality – violates Gods commission in this regard: and is therefore prohibited!

22

¹⁶ Bailey, Derrick Sherwin	Homosexuality and the Western Culture	page 30	Longman Green 1955
¹⁷ Stott, John	Same Sex Relationships	page 50	Good Book Company
¹⁸ Gane, Roy	Leviticus, Numbers	page 321	Zondervan
¹⁹ Although he does qualify this position later in the chapter			
²⁰ Gane, Roy	Leviticus, Numbers	page 321	Zondervan
²¹ Milgrom, J	Leviticus 17-22	page 150-31	Doubleday
²² Milgrom, J Quoted in Balentine	Leviticus	page 158	John Knox

Balentine then focusses more precisely on the issue of homosexual activity, making a number of important points.

He says:

“1) the ban on homosexuality is but one of more than a dozen behaviours proscribed in Leviticus 18 and 20. It is accorded no more importance than other prohibitions, many of which seem not to have made much impact on the community of faith. Except perhaps amongst the most fundamental religious communities, we do not measure obedience to God by killing children who curse their parents (20.9) or men who commit adultery with another man’s wife (20.10)

2) All the prohibitions in 18 and 20 assume a patriarchal structure for society. As such they are addressed primarily to males not females....in this regard the homosexual ban addresses only sexual acts between men: there is no proscription against lesbianism.

3) The later part of the phrase ‘lie with a male as with a woman’is an idiom used only for homosexual acts performed by heterosexuals (Milgrom, Leviticus 17-22p 1786, Levine p 12 et al). The text does not address homosexuality in terms of a permanent sexual orientation.²³

Balentine continues,

“Moreover, the text does not proscribe all acts of male homosexuality. It focuses instead on heterosexual males performing homosexual acts with other males within the family unit, for example nephew with uncle, grandson with grandfather (Milgrom, Leviticus 17-22 pg. 1786)

Passages which refer to homosexual activity have in mind consistently it seems, homosexual acts by essentially heterosexual people who choose to act in this particular way for reasons of their own.

So, even from a traditional perspective, it is noted that the passage does not contemplate the idea of settled sexual orientation or long-term commitment, but rather has in view the temporary decision to choose same-sex activity as a matter of preference.

We will see this again today when we turn to New Testament passages.

In his ground-shifting book ‘God and the Gay Christian’, Matthew Vines, consideration of this scripture begins from a different place.²⁴

He indicates that many of the prohibitions in Leviticus are no longer regarded as valid in the Christian church.

- the bans on eating shellfish (Leviticus 11.10)
- and wearing mixed fibres (Leviticus 19.19)
- getting tattoos (Leviticus 19.28)
- cutting the hair on the side of your heads (19.27) being just a few of them.

²³ Balentine, Samuel E.

Leviticus

page 159

John Knox

²⁴ Vines, Matthew

God and the gay Christian

page 78ff

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There is of course, work to be done on the relationship between Old Testament Law and the Christian faith. What of these prohibitions remains in place in the new covenant of Jesus Christ? Why do we seek to impose these particular prohibitions concerning homosexual activity, whilst happily setting others aside?

How much of this is the stuff Paul refers to as *'The yoke of slavery'* from which we have been set free by the death and exultation of Jesus? Many of these rules, prohibitions and punishments have gone now of course. But the question of our ponderings remains, "Are we also 'liberated' from the prohibitions of male same-sex intercourse?"

Jeffrey John – who does not think highly of some parts of the evangelical theological hierarchy having been 'judged' by them regarding his own calling and sexuality – is dismissive of the Holiness Code today, saying:

"Ethical derivation here can only ever be highly selective. Of themselves, the Levitical rules are in practice never regarded as having moral force for Christians, and Christians are not accustomed to look to them for guidance – except when seeking a text with which to beat homosexuals"²⁵

Horner is only marginally more accommodating for those who seek to impose these verses as 'proof texts':

"Christians are inclined to say that Christ has liberated them from having to observe all the Jewish laws, which is indeed true (although this is often been taken to mean that they are liberated only from those laws that they dislike)." ²⁶

Vines moves on and asks the question then, in his own assessment of the Holiness Code, *'Is homosexuality an abomination?'* and spends time looking at the use of that word in the Old Testament. ²⁷

The word translation abomination (or detestable, in my version) is the heb. word 'toevah' and it occurs 117 times in the Old Testament.

In the vast majority of cases it refers to the idolatrous practices of Gentiles which led Old Testament scholar Phyllis Bird to conclude that 'it is not an ethical term, but a boundary marker'. Aelred picks up this idea and notes the prohibitions listed before and after the reference to male/male sexual penetration. ²⁸

Before

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.*

After,

²³ *"Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion*

In the middle:

²² *"Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.*

²⁵ John, Jeffrey Permanent, Faithful, Stable

²⁶ Horner. Tom Jonathan loved David

²⁷ Vines, Matthew God and the gay Christian

²⁸ Aelred, Peter To melt a golden calf

page 12

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DLT

Westminster Press

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page 40

Amazon

Concluding,

²⁴ *“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.*

So, Bird ²⁹, Vines and Aelred (and others) share this view of the use of the word ‘*toevah*’ to serve as a boundary marker for orthodox Hebrew faith and practice, rather than an ethical statement. The holiness code, complete with its various ‘*toevah*’s set boundaries to prevent the people of God taking on board the culture around them. They were the traffic cones of the ancient world to keep the people safe as they travelled.

Aelred concludes

“Much of Leviticus is written as a response to the depraved culture and religion of the Canaanites, the people the Hebrews were displacing”.

Even very theologically conservative historians believe that the prohibitions on child sacrifice, male homosexuality and female bestiality are specifically referring to the most offensive cultic rituals of the Canaanites as they worshipped their false gods” ³⁰

So, in this sense the boundary markers were context and culture specific – to protect the people from the pagan Canaanite practices around them. And maybe this boundary marker concept explains why a number of practices are no longer considered worthy of prohibition for us, whilst they were regarded as ‘detestable’ in the Old Testament:

Sexual relations during a menstrual period (Leviticus 18.19); charging interest on loans (Ezekiel 18.13); burning incense (Isaiah 1.1) were all considered ‘*toevah*’.

There is a list of ‘abominations’, in Deuteronomy 14 including eating pork, rabbit, shellfish and (curiously) animals that are already dead, none of which would qualify as abominations in mainstream modern, western culture. So, whilst ‘abomination’ is a negative word, it does not in our experience necessarily correspond with Christian view of sin!

So, if we bring the boundary markers back to these Levitical passages, what else do we discover?

Well, now Vines takes us on a surprising, but I think persuasive road. And he begins by highlighting again Balentine’s point about the patriarchal society in which these laws were written and enacted. Vines suggests that in effect, the declaration that male same-sex penetration is ‘*detestable*’, actually has much more to do with the status of women in the Levitical context, than with the sexual activity of men in the same setting! ³¹

Peter Aelred highlights an ancient worldview ‘that attached inferiority to being sexually penetrated’ ³² – and so in normal heterosexual activity the man was regarded as superior to the woman because the man penetrated, and the woman consented to being penetrated. Imagine then, the argument goes, the disgrace of being a man willing to become so vile as to adopt the place of a women in the sexual encounter! In this argument, it is the importance of patriarchal status that actually at stake here. Vines

²⁹ Bird, Phyllis A.	The Bible in Christians Ethical Deliberation Concerning Homosexuality	
³⁰ Aelred, Peter	To melt a golden calf (quoting John MacArthur Bible Commentary)	page 42
³¹ Vines, Matthew	God and the gay Christian	page 87ff Convergent Books
³² Aelred, Peter	To melt a golden calf	page 42 Amazon

supports this by quoting one of the earliest commentators on this passages, C1st Philo. On this verse, he directs his outrage not at the act of penetration itself but rather that males might suffer ‘the afflictions of being treated like women’! ³³

In effect, Vines and Aelred argue that the offence of homosexual activity in this verse is about the one penetrated becoming like the ‘lesser valued’ woman and therefore rejecting the higher status of male. And, to go right back to the arguments at the start of this section, such disregard for established gender roles would potentially cause harm to community cohesion and was therefore prohibited in the Holiness Code! And Vines goes on to provide other sources which support this understanding. ³⁴

The Levitical Law focusses on male sexual activity (there is no prohibition of lesbian activities) basically because women were considered of such little value anyway that if they got together, no harm was done to the cohesion of society – except of course if they were involved in bestiality (the next prohibition in the list) because then they were allowing an animal to usurp the role of the male! So, in the patriarchal hierarchy of the day, by engaging in bestiality women were rejecting human male penetration in favour of that by animals and so the status of the male was again diminished, and the established order of society challenged. (and so, it goes on)

Now, I know that this kind of argument is likely to offend us all in a different way, but it just reminds us that we have to spend time understanding ‘*what it means then...*’ before we can assume, we have understood its meaning today.

In our day, even those who would argue that women and men should not have equal roles (like conservative scholars John Piper and Wayne Grudem), would want to affirm that men and women do have equal worth. But that idea was anathema to the culture of Bible times – and the further you go back in the Bible the more pronounced the patriarchy becomes.

Women were simply thought to be of less value than men.

How else could a father offer his daughters to a mob bent on gang rape as was the case at with Lot at Sodom!?

So, the boundary marker denoted by the use of the word ‘abomination’ or ‘detestable’ is not actually perhaps about homosexual sexual activity per se, but about denying gender roles! This argument suggests that the emphasis in the verse should not be on ‘*man lies with a man*’.... but rather ‘*as he does with a woman!*’

And that is why – according to this argument - it is an abomination likely to harm family and community unity!

³³ Vines, Matthew

God and the gay Christian

page 87

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³⁴ Vines, Matthew

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Leviticus summary:

In handling this verse from Leviticus,

- we note that some – though in my reading, a minority of - Biblical scholars are content to accept these two verses to be sufficient as God’s condemnation on all same-sex penetrative activity and end discussion there.
- we need to note that the prohibition of male penetrative sex is but one of 20 or so prohibitions which – according to conservative scholars – relate to factors that could undermine the fabric of society.
- We note that many other of those prohibitions are no longer regarded as valid in our contemporary culture and context.
- We note that the use of the word translated as ‘abomination’ or ‘detestable’ is common in the Old Testament and usually relates to boundary markers against idolatry rather than ethics and almost never sexual ethics – and that those prohibitions may actually set markers against cultic practices of the Canaanites religions of the day
- We note that we have to read the prohibition against homosexual acts in the context of a stridently patriarchal society in which to take the passive role in sexual activity was to assume a devalued and devaluing place.
- We note too Balentine’s conclusion that “The text does not address homosexuality in terms of a permanent sexual orientation.” Nor does the text the “proscribe all acts of male homosexuality. It focuses instead on heterosexual males performing homosexual acts with other males within the family unit”

Affirming and non-affirming scholars alike agree that the cultural and religious differences of the Old Testament world make it hard to draw firm conclusions from snippets of ancient text. However, let’s see what the New Testament scriptures have to offer.

2.4 **Romans 1.26-27**

Let’s begin in Romans chapter 1.

In these early chapters of Romans, Paul is setting out a sad and dark picture of a world which is losing touch with the gracious and loving God. One foolish decision has led to a foolish action; and another foolish decision has led to another foolish action. And with each decision and action humanity is spiralling further and further away from the Lord.

In the middle of this passage, he sets these words.

Romans 1:26-27 (NIV2011)

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned

natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Let me begin with what we understand as the traditional, non-affirming position and allow scholar William Hendriksen to make the case against homosexuality clearly and powerfully (and rather brutally) from this passage. He writes in 1985:

“It is clear that the apostle is censuring the wilful practice of homosexuality or sodomy. And indeed, Scripture does not make light of the vice. In Leviticus 20 the death penalty is pronounced upon its perpetrators. For more information on this horrible evil read.... (and there follow a long list of references).

“A person’s sexual orientation, whether heterosexual or homosexual is not the point at issue here” he continues “What matters is what a person does with their sexuality”³⁵

Well that is clear at least!

John Murray in his volume in the International Commentary Series joins the argument.

“In verse 26 we are for the first time informed of the specific type of vice which the apostle had in mind when he referred to ‘uncleanness’.... It is apparent that what he has in view here and in verse 27 is the homosexual abomination. That he should have mentioned the woman first is undoubtedly for the purpose of accentuating the grossness of the evil: ‘for even the women”.

Murray concludes the section:

“The implication is that however grievous is fornication or adultery the desecration involved in homosexuality is on a lower plane of degeneracy: it is unnatural and therefore evinces a perversion more basic”³⁶

Again: crystal clear. We note that this passage was originally written in 1968 which was of course only a year after homosexuality was decriminalised in the UK. Nevertheless, regardless of my theological position, I find the language alarming, unhelpful – and not conducive to a gracious conversation!

Just to recap then, Lesbian sin – for that is what it was named - was according to Murray and Hendriksen, a more serious sin than homosexuality (because it involved women) and both of these sexual sins were more sinful than fornication or adultery! They argue, not only that lesbian and homosexuality are sins, but there is somehow a hierarchy of sin, even amidst sexual ‘sin’. It is, to my mind, an extraordinary reminder of just how far conservative theology and language has moved in 50 years.

So, am I able to find a more even-handed consideration of the traditional, non-affirming position?

Methodist scholar Jimmy Dunn comments that

“Paul’s indictment seems to include all kinds of homosexual practice, female as well as male, and was not directed against one kind of homosexual practice as distinguished from another”³⁷

³⁵ Hendriksen, William

Romans

page 78

Banner of Truth

³⁶ Murray, John

The Epistle to the Romans

page 48

Eerdmans

³⁷ Dunn, James D.G.

Romans 1-8

page 65

Word

He acknowledges helpfully that

“in the Greco-Roman world homosexuality was quite common and even highly regarded.... It was a feature of social life.”

But, he adds,

“But Jewish reaction to it as a perversion, an abomination is consistent throughout the Old Testament.”³⁸

Tom Wright, also taking a non-affirming (yet pastoral position) writes well on the passage in his Everyone series of commentaries³⁹. And I quote him at length because I think he sets out in a balanced way the non-affirming arguments in this important passage, carefully and kindly.

“Throughout this passage, Paul has in mind one particular Biblical passage, namely Genesis 1-3.... He wants to trace the way in which humans have violated, not simply a law given at some point in human history, but the very structure of the created order itself.

“Paul assumes that there is a structure.... Taking Genesis 1 as the primary theological statement, he sees humanity created in God’s image and given charge over the non-human creation.

“Humans are commanded to be fruitful: they are to celebrate, in their male-female complementarity, the abundant life-generating capacity of God’s good world. They are charged with bringing God’s order to the world, acting as stewards of the garden and all that is in it.

“Males and females are very different, and they are designed to work together to make, with God, the music of creation. Something deep within the structure of the word responds to the coming together of like and unlike, something which cannot be reached by the mere joining together of like and like.

This helps explain the otherwise baffling fact that the very first instance Paul gives of what he sees as the corruption of human life is the practice of homosexual relations. Why on earth, we think, would he single out this particular behaviour and place it at the top of the list? His point is not simply that ‘we Jews don’t approve of this’ or ‘relationships like this are always unequal and exploitative’. His point is, ‘this is not what males and females were made for’.

“Nor is he suggesting that everyone who feels sexually attracted to members of their own sex, or everyone who actually engages in same-sex relations have got to the point by committing acts of idolatry.

“Nor again, does he suppose that all those who find themselves in that situation have arrived there by a deliberate choice to give up heterosexual possibilities. Reading the text like that reflects modern individualism rather than Paul’s larger, all-embracing perspective.

“Rather, he is talking about the human race as a whole. His point is not ‘there are some exceptionally wicked people out there who do revolting things’ but, ‘The fact that such clear

³⁸ Dunn, James D.G.

Romans 1-8

page 65

Word

³⁹ Wright, Tom

Paul for Everyone: Romans part 1

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distortions of the Creator's male-plus-female intention occur in the world indicates that the human race as a whole is guilty of a character-twisting idolatry'.

Paul sees the practice of same-sex relations as a sign that the human world in general is out of joint."

Wright then draws his work on these two verses together with this measured conclusion:

"This is not of course, the last word on the subject of homosexuality. Paul as only written two verses on it at this point, hardly enough for us to deduce more than a little of any fuller position he might have stated. But beyond the polemic and rhetoric that fly to and fro on this topic, we find here and elsewhere in the New Testament, not a set of arbitrary rules but a deep theology of what it means to be genuinely human, and a warning about the apparently infinite capacity of human beings for self-deception"⁴⁰

We will of course return to the Genesis passages in our next Study when we think about the Bible's understanding of marriage – and trace God's purpose for humanity. But it is just worth pausing with Tom Wright here, whether we agree with his assessment or not. His tone is gracious; his theology is careful, and he draws out from these two important verses a valuable attempt to 'do theology' rather than simply recite the words themselves.

He links Paul's apparent objection to homosexuality with a dislocated creation: however, he is careful to state that homosexuality is not necessarily the choice of those who experience same-sex attraction – but rather the outcome in a creation which is no longer quite as God created it to be. Now, that theological position would not be universally accepted because it effectively says that being gay is an outcome of The Fall, which is too close to calling homosexuality sin for some to be comfortable with – but there is at least the basis for a gracious conversation here – which I doubt that many would be able to have with Mr Murray or Mr Hendriksen quoted at the start of this section!

Let's stay with Romans chapter 1 a little longer and consider what others have to say.

Vines again is helpful here. His honest appraisal concedes,

'There is no question that Romans 1.26-27 is the most significant Biblical passage in this debate. It is the longest reference to same-sex behaviour in the New Testament"⁴¹

But are we justified in using the passage to reject same-sex orientation?

Was Paul's intent to teach that gay people's sexual orientation falls outside of God's natural design as Tom Wright suggests? Certainly, his words in Romans 1 have long been read as a rejection of all same-sex relationships. But is that a faithful application of the text today?

We note of course, the fact that Paul's description of same-sex behaviour in this passage is indisputably negative. But we also have to note that it is described the behaviour as lustful: debauched and excessive: making no mention of love, fidelity, monogamy or commitment.

⁴⁰ Wright, Tom

⁴¹ Vines, Matthew

Paul for Everyone: Romans part 1

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page 22-24

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From this passage are we able to conclude therefore that his condemnation applies to all same-sex relationships? Or just lust-filled, debauched and fleeting ones?

Vine picks up the argument offered by Wright that same-sex relationships violate God's male-female-complementarity and asks, *'Is that what Paul says in Romans?'*

To begin to answer that question Matthew Vines looks at the words 'natural' and 'unnatural' used by Paul.⁴² He adopts an argument by historian John Boswell who contended that Paul condemned only same-sex behaviour that was practiced by heterosexual people: straight people acting like gay people. Certainly (although Wright would not agree) there is a description of *'exchanging'* or *'abandoning'* opposite sex activities for same sex activities. The people choosing to act that way – the argument goes – could have found satisfaction and fulfilment in opposite-sex relationships or activity: but chose not to. Those engaging in homosexual activities were not, the argument goes, homosexually orientated, but were heterosexuals choosing to fulfil their uncontrolled lusts in same sex activity!

That is key to the argument here.

A few minutes ago, I quoted James Dunn, who commented that

'in the Greco-Roman world homosexuality was quite common and even highly regarded.... It was a feature of social life.'⁴³

and the evidence from a number of sources from across the theological and historic spectrum is that that was true. But what is missing from that understanding, is an appreciation that most homosexual activity was fleeting. The idea of settled sexual orientation was not part of Greco-Roman culture. Homosexuality was part of social life where essentially heterosexual men chose to take part in homosexual activities as a way of satisfying excessive sexual appetites.

The overwhelming majority of visible same-sex behaviour fits easily into a paradigm of excess. Again, Vines sets out at length evidence from the culture of the day that same-sex relationships were not objectionable because the partners shared the same anatomy: but because they demonstrated hedonistic self-indulgence. In moderation

"that appetite manifested itself in heterosexual desire and behaviour. But in excess, it led to same-sex desire and behaviour."⁴⁴

Vines quotes Dio Chrysostom – first century Greek orator, writer, philosopher and historian - who describes 'the man' who exchanges heterosexual activity for homosexual activity to satisfy uncontrolled lust as akin to

'that of men who are addicted to drinking and wine-bibbing, who after long and steady drinking of unmixed wine, often lose their taste for it and create an artificial thirst by the stimulus of sweating, salted foods and condiments'⁴⁵

⁴² Vines, Matthew

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⁴³ Dunn, James D.G.

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⁴⁴ Vines, Matthew

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⁴⁵ Dio Chrysostom

The seventh or Euboean Discourse vol1.

University of Chicago

“Some people, Dio said, “are so insatiable that ordinary pleasures no longer satisfy them. They try to intensify their desires through new, exotic modes of self-gratification.....With sex, it means abandoning the “easy conquest” of women for the rarer, more challenging ex with males” ⁴⁶

And if you re-read Paul’s passage you can begin to see how he sees uncontrolled excess as a factor in the fall away from God’s plans and purposes.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

There is no sense of reflection or development – just excessive passion evidenced in lust!

The most common forms of same-sex behaviour in the Greco-Roman world of the time were pederasty (sex between men and boys), prostitution and sex between masters and slaves. The majority of men who indulged in those practices also engaged in heterosexual behaviour, often during the same times in their lives. It may be that Paul has in focus here, not the Judeo-Christian world at all, but rather the Greco-Roman world surrounding the church, where pagans have deliberately rejected God from the centre of their lives and have substituted creatures and corruption. And the lustful exchange of ‘natural’ relations to ‘unnatural’ is one outworking of that corruption. They are choosing excess, which is physically demonstrated through electing to engage in same-sex passions.

Given then, the cultural status of same-sex behaviour in the ancient world’ argues Vine,

‘it’s not surprising that Paul condemns it. He opposed all forms of lust – sexual desire indulged to the excessive height of same-sex behaviour (by heterosexual beings) would have been no exception.’ ⁴⁷

If this is our understanding of the passage, then Paul is not condemning an expressing of a same-sex orientation, but the expression of an opposite-sex lust, acted out in a same sex activity.

Romans 1:26-27 (NIV2011)

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.

A C4th commentary on the passage by John Chrysostom shows how these words were interpreted by those early Christians:

He writes:

“Notice how deliberately Paul measures his words. For he does not say that they were enamoured of one another, but that they were consumed by lust for one another! You see that the whole of desire comes from an excess which cannot contain itself within proper limits” ⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Vines, Matthew

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⁴⁷ Vines, Matthew

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⁴⁸ Chrysostom, John

Homilies on Romans 4 (Quoted in Bray and Oden: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Romans vol. 6 Intersarsity Press page 47-48

The interpretation of Paul's words as blanket condemnation of all homosexual activities may in fact be more modern development than we think because clearly in the C4th the emphasis was on lacking self-control which showed itself in sexual excess!

Again, we have to ask ourselves the degree to which the rejection of homosexual practice in this passage can be equated with the expression of homosexual love through committed same-sex relationships.

Whenever the Bible has anything to say about homosexuality, it is never positive. That, everyone concedes. But we return to the question of whether or not the Biblical world had any concept of settled same-sex orientation expressed in committed, mutual relationships. The evidence is that the concept was alien to the culture of the period, even though homosexual activity was common.

It was about power, abuse and pagan worship. Not love, commitment and intimacy.

Sex between men was not considered adultery – and so, when sexual appetites could not be satisfied 'in the male/female' marriage, then men would step outside of that relationship with impunity.

Is that the context in which Paul writes these tough words – and if it was, then we are still left asking the question: *'where does this leave gay Christians who seek committed relationships today?'*

Summary of Romans 1

So, what have we found here?

- Some traditionalists use this passage as the sledgehammer text to 'win the argument'.
- Most scholars believe that this is the most significant passage relating to homosexuality in the New Testament.
- Some, Tom Wright being one, see in this a developed theology that says, not that gay people choose to be gay, but rather than the existence of homosexual and lesbian people indicate that creation is somehow dislocated from God's original plans and purposes. And therefore, presumably, that the expression of that same-sex position, is out of line with God's plans and purposes and should be refrained from. That position is of course a tough one for those who are so orientated – but that doesn't change the theology underpinning it.
- An alternative view is more individualistic and suggests that homosexual activity by essentially heterosexual people was an outworking of uncontrolled lust – particularly evidenced in the pagan world around the church and that it was this self-centred idolatry which caused Paul's condemnation. The dislocation of creation, which sees humanity as falling further and further away from God's plans and purposes has resulted in a loss of self-control which is expressed in permissive, lust filled, same-sex activity, which is contrary to God's plan.
- The most common expressions of same sex activity in the Greco-Roman world evidence of men lacking self-control, acting outside of marriage without penalty or man/boy prostitution. Is this what Paul had in his sights?
- The question remains therefore, 'Does this verse actually have something to say to those whose expression of sexuality is not lust-filled but loving: not a temporary expression seeking gratification, but a settled commitment seeking intimacy and companionship?'

2.5 Malakoi an Arsenokoitai

The challenge of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy

So, we have worked our way through some of the fragments of Scripture that have come to shape our perspective on homosexuality in the Bible.

Romans 1 remains the key passage for many perhaps, but there are two other New Testament passages that we need to sit closely with for they contain two Greek words which have important significance for us as we deliberate.

The passages are 1 Corinthians 6.7-11 and 1 Timothy 1.8-11: and our two words are ‘malakoi’ and ‘arsenokoitai’

1 Corinthians 6:7-11 (NIV2011)

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? ⁸ Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters. ⁹ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ 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.

1 Timothy 1:8-11 (NIV2011)

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. ⁹ We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine ¹¹ that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

In 2008, Michigan attorney Bradley Fowler sued Zondervan Publishing house for 60 million dollars because they translated the second of those words (arsenokoites) as ‘*homosexual offenders*’ in the 1984 version of the NIV Bible. Fowler argued that the translation ‘caused him years of anxiety, loss of sleep, appetite, self-esteem and the ability to re-establish family bonds’ Fowler did not win the lawsuit, but his action did give a huge reminder that translations matters. ⁴⁹

Translations of particular words are vitally important – especially so, if the impact of those translations is to condemn sections of the population. We must be certain of our ground. And when it comes to these two words, in these two key passages in our discussion, that certainty is not copiously available.

Richard Hays tells us in his commentary:

⁴⁹ Sprinkle, Preston

“there has been much scholarly debate recently over the proper interpretation of these words. ‘Malakoi’ means literally, ‘The soft ones’. It could sometimes refer to male prostitutes – particularly young boys who were the passive partners in pederastic relationships.

“The second word”, he contends (arsenokoitai) “however is a general term for men who engage in same sex intercourse. Although the word arsenokoitai appears nowhere else in Greek literature prior to Paul’s use of it here, it is evidently a rendering into Greek of the standard rabbinic terms for ‘one who lies with a male’. Paul here repeats the standard Jewish condemnation of homosexual conduct.”⁵⁰

Tom Wright too expresses his view that taken together malakoi and arsenokoites refer to the practice of male homosexuality, suggesting that

“the two terms refer respectively to the passive or submissive partner and the active and aggressive one, and Paul places both roles in a list of unacceptable behaviour”⁵¹

CK Barrett concludes that these words that together describe

‘The passive and active partners in male homosexual relations’⁵²

and therefore, supports Hay and Wright in their conclusion that Paul is simply condemning all homosexual acts.

Commenting on Paul’s use of the word ‘malakoi’, Fee affirms the basic meaning as ‘soft’, but notes,

“that it also became a pejorative epithet for men who were ‘soft’ or ‘effeminate’, most likely referring to the younger, passive partner in a pederastic relationship – the most common form of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world”⁵³

Scroggs opts for a translation of ‘*effeminate call-boy*’⁵⁴ as a valid translation of the use of ‘malakoi’ here in 1 Corinthians 6

If non-affirming scholars conclude that the words used together describe the active and passive participants in male sexual intercourse, affirming scholars are far less certain of the meanings of the word and certainly want to consider the fact that the use of the word does not always have homosexual overtones.

Daniel Helminiak says that

“Nobody knows for certain what these words mean, so to use them to condemn homosexuals is really dishonest and unfair”⁵⁵

‘Malakos’ is a widely used word and does indeed seem to mean ‘soft’ or delicate.

Strangely, given our context here it appears in Matthew 11.8 to describe fine clothing, but in a moral context is describes a lack of “self-control, weakness, laziness or cowardice”. To use the phrase ‘taking the

⁵⁰ Hays, Richard B.	First Corinthians	page 97	John Knox Press
⁵¹ Wright, Tom	Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians	Page 69	SPCK
⁵² Barrett, C.K.	The First Epistle to the Corinthians	page 140	A & C Black
⁵³ Fee, Gordon D.	The First Epistle to the Corinthians	page 243	Eerdmans
⁵⁴ Scroggs. R	The New Testament and Homosexuality	page 62-65	Fortress Press
⁵⁵ in Sprinkle, Preston	People to be loved	page 105	Zondervan

soft option' would perhaps catch something of the way the word was used in Biblical times. Some translations of the Bible into English have 'effeminate'

It was, it seems, an all-inclusive insult for anything that (in a patriarchal world) could be considered feminine. Women remember, were thought to lack self-control over things like appetite and emotions, whereas men – or at least 'real' men – were fine examples of temperance and reason. So, any man who demonstrated 'soft', effeminate behaviour – behaviour lacking control was regarded as 'malakoi' – and this did not necessarily have anything to do with sexual behaviour: still less, same-sex sexual behaviour.

In fact, amazingly, Vines argues from the writings of the day, that quite the opposite is true. There is ample evidence to suggest that a more common use of the word malakoi was to describe someone who became overcome by the sensual and sexual whiles of a woman.⁵⁶

A man became '*malakos*' if their usual capacity to reason and function effectively became diminished because they became over occupied or mesmerised by a woman suiter. Roman General Pompey was described as Malakos because

'he weakly succumbed to his passion for his young wife'

And in Plutarch's 'Dialogue of Love' forms of the word 'malakos' are applied to men who love women.⁵⁷

It might reasonably be translated either as 'effeminate' (as Sprinkler has it) or equally, '*those who lack self-control*' (as Vines suggests) and have nothing to do with same-sex relationships at all!

If our discussion of 'malakoi' has been wide-ranging, we can be even less certain of the meaning of the composite word arsenokoites.

The two words which make it up are 'Arsen' which means male and 'koite' – which just means bed! – so if we are using the phrase in a sexual sense then the phrase is literally 'men who go to bed' – or, in our idiom, sleep with! So, we might conclude therefore – as many have – that the composite words mean 'men who sleep with men'.

However, we can be far from certain that this is an appropriate use of the word. Just lumping two words together, doesn't always mean we have a full comprehension of what comes out. For example, as Vines indicates, we have two words that make up understand. But when joined together, the meaning of the resultant word has nothing to do with 'Standing under'! That is not to say that arsenokoites cannot mean '*men who sleep with men*' but rather that we have to be very careful to assume that is the intended meaning. Martin Luther's own translation of the Bible completed in 1534, consistently translated 'arsenokoites' as '*boy molesters*.' (paedophiles)

Arsenokoites is a word only used here by Paul (many argue that it is a word he invented) and is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Scholars suggest that as the two parts of the word (arsen koite) are contained in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of that verse from Leviticus (18.22) and that was why Paul used it here.⁵⁸ If that is so – if Paul has deliberately chosen to mimic the phrase from Leviticus and press it

⁵⁶ Vines, Matthew God and the gay Christian

page 120 at al

Convergent Books

⁵⁷ Plutarch in Vines, Matthew Life of Pompey

48.5-7

⁵⁸ Stott, John R.W. The message of 1 Timothy and Titus

page 49

IVP

into service here - then the conclusion must be that he intended to express his view that homosexual acts displeased God.

This is the argument tentatively proposed by Fee who notes that *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*,

“appear side by side in a vice list that is heavily weighted towards sexual sins. Although one cannot be certain, it is very likely that the NIV is moving towards a proper understanding by translating ‘male prostitute’ and ‘homosexual offender’, with the proviso that ‘male prostitute’ most likely denotes a consenting homosexual youth”⁵⁹

However, Fee’s position is perhaps somewhat diminished when we note that, the Biblical scholars trusted with the 2011 edition of the New International Version (NIV) made the decision to move away from the cited translation in their most recent editions, instead choosing to translate both words into one phrase ‘men who have sex with men’. This is unfortunate because, although teasing out the exact meaning of the words is difficult – especially in the case of *arsenokoites*, as John Stott observes “they should not be combined, since they have precise meanings”⁶⁰

Whilst this revised wording in the 2011 NIV does not of itself, make the list any less problematic for those adopting an affirming position, the ongoing changes do serve to illustrate the continuing difficulties in coming to any settled understanding of what Paul intended when he used those particular words. The change in translation, may of course simply be the result of the aforementioned lawsuit – but larger questions around use and intent remain.

In fact, looking at the use of the word in literature after Paul (and there are not many examples to work with), most uses have a sense of exploitation or violations of justice. For example, the C2nd Acts of John uses the word ‘*arsenokoitai*’ in the context of economic exploitation and power abuses: and later actually has a separate list of sexual vices in which the word is conspicuous by its absence.⁶¹

Now, with that in mind, we return to 1 Corinthians 6 and find that *arsenokoitai* finds its place between references to the ‘*sexually immoral*’ and ‘*adulterers*’ and before ‘*thieves*’ and ‘*greedy*’.

Which way is the word supposed to look? Towards sexual sins or towards ethical sins?

In 1 Timothy’s use of the word, it appears after ‘*sexually immoral*’ and before ‘*slave traders*’. Same question. Which way is ‘*arsenokoitai*’ supposed to look? The evidence from beyond scripture might suggest that Paul is concerned about economic and ethical malpractice rather than sexual activity at all.

Or is *arsenokoites* used to describe some kind of sexual and economic exploitation – which would then look (not to the prohibition of all homosexual activity) but to the most common forms of sexual exploitation of the time, that of pedistry (sex between men with boys for sexual gratification and profit)?

Once more, we might settle in a place where we discover that it is possible to take this scripture seriously, but through proper study to conclude that it says little to the kinds of same-sex relationships we are considering within same-sex marriage arrangements.

⁵⁹ Fee, Gordon D. The First Epistle to the Corinthians

⁶⁰ Stott, John Same sex relationships

⁶¹ Translated by Wilhelm Schneemelcher Acts of John (36)

Summary of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy

- In these passages, we have two vital words which in the C20th have become joined together in translations to give the perception that they condemn all homosexual activity: and some would maintain that that is an accurate understanding.
- And yet, there is evidence to suggest that that we have misunderstood their context and have read into them an interpretation the words themselves to not support.
- We note that in some translations of the Bible in Europe the introduction of the word homosexual (and related terms) has come only in the last 50 years.
- Where there is a sexual connotation, it may reflect the passive and active participants in men/boy pedistry.
- Are we talking about a condemnation of the passive and active partners in a homosexual encounter or are we talking about those who use economic and social power to exploit the 'soft' ones – the boys in an abusive same sex encounter?

Study 2: Summary

And so, we come towards the end of our exploration of fragments of scripture that express something about homosexuality.

- I have tried to set out clearly the (often) traditionally held position and then looked at those views again through filters of a more accommodating and affirming interpretation. The challenge it to determine if those interpretations are valid whilst remaining faithful to Scripture. My conclusion, for what it is worth, is that they probably are – but, then, quite possibly, so are some of the more traditional understandings. It is in this tension that the conundrum of judgment is located for me!
- Whilst we concede that if the Bible speaks of homosexual activity it has nothing positive to say, we have to also recognise that the Bible actually does not have much to say about homosexual activity at all! (in one Study we have considered every reference!) But we also need to take seriously our discovery that the Bible has even less to say about committed same-sex relationship, the kind of which might outcome in marriage. In fact, the Bible is silent on such relationships.

In our next Study, we will wrestle with the question of Biblical marriage; try to define it and identify what parts come together to make it up. And then, we will ask how far the Biblical ideal for marriage can or cannot be met in a same-sex relationship.

“Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone; only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God: and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak.” (John Wesley)

In this Study, we have sat with Scripture; we have sat with those who study scripture and we have listened to a variety of views.

We have tried to move from the '*this is what it says*' beginning to the '*this is what it means for us*' understanding. And who knows if we have reached conclusions or modified views along the way. But I hope that we might have opened up a conversation at least.

Study 3 One flesh: Holding to ‘Biblical’ marriage

3.1 A Recap

Allow me to recap where we have travelled so far.

In our first study we looked at the nature and authority of Scripture as the Word of God. I suggested that careful Biblical study needed not only to be clear about what the text said, but also to try to discern the original context of the text. Three questions applied to the written text can help us along the way: What did it mean then? What does it mean now? And what difference does it make (how is it to be applied today)?

We then explored some examples of how the Church from the early New Testament days, right through the centuries has interpreted and applied scripture for the contemporary context, in the light of the prompting of God’s Spirit, the advances of human understanding, social and moral ethics, human rights, a struggle for justice and science. That reinterpretation has not, we suggested, resulted in the rejection of Scripture as the inspired Word of God – but rather, has allowed us to cherish Scripture as the Living Word across the centuries and through which the Lord continues to communicate with and inspire his people. We concluded therefore, that to return to Scriptural texts and re-examine them to see if our received understanding of them still reflects what God is saying to us today is not only a valid method of study, but also places us firmly in the traditions of the Church from the very beginning.

In our second study we looked at some of the key Biblical texts that help us reflect on the matters of sexuality in Scripture -particularly in the area of homosexual expression and activity. We heard traditional texts and reflected traditional interpretations of them as our starting place. We then set alongside *that* exegesis the views of other scholars who might be regarded as more affirming of homosexual relationships. We discovered that different scholars can come to the same texts – all seeking to be faithful to Scripture – and yet draw very different conclusions from what they discover there. My task, as I determined it, was not to suggest which interpretations from across the spectrum held the greatest weight, but rather to illustrate that there are different and credible ways of approaching Sacred Texts and that there is a conversation to have with various interpretations that come out of that approach.

In this our third Study, we return to Scripture – because that is basically all this series tries to do. This time, we are seeking to discern if there is a clear understanding of what might be termed ‘Biblical marriage’ – and if there is, how can same-sex marriage either reflect that understanding or fail to reflect it? Again, as I am sure you will appreciate, that - although this study will be less technical than last time- it doesn’t necessarily make it any more straightforward.

3.2 Is there such a thing as Biblical marriage?

Reflecting the position as of today, the current Standing Orders of the Methodist church, state that marriage

“is a gift of God and that it is God’s intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman.”⁶²

⁶² Methodist Standing Order O11A (1)

Is that the definition of Biblical Marriage? It is certainly pretty close to the definition and understanding with which I grew up within the life of the Methodist Church.

But is that a satisfactory definition of biblical marriage?

Well, from time to time you will uncover those who seek to affirm same-sex relationships and promote the possibility and validity of same-sex marriage by arguing that the whole concept of Biblical Marriage is far less clear than that. They will point to accounts in Scripture where polygamy is recorded and even times when leading figures keep a number of wives and also engage concubines. Which model of 'biblical marriage' are you suggesting? they will argue mischievously.

To be honest, I think that kind of argument cheapens our exploration and does nothing whatsoever to assist us in seeking God heart in this. Yes, such accounts are recorded in Scripture, but they are not affirmed as settled examples of godly relationships and I do not intend to spend time exploring them today.

However, as these studies relate to the responses within a church setting in our British, western culture, I do think that we should note that customs and traditions concerning marriage are not universal around the world – even within the Christian community. I recall clearly the occasion when – whilst serving as a Mission Partner – my father had the awkward pastoral issue of a Circuit Steward in his church who had a collection of wives, and saw Scripture as supporting an aspect of local culture that he found to his particular liking!

So, we must remember that as we seek to identify Biblical marriage from our perspective and culture, we will be making assumptions that others may not readily share.

And again, in case we might think that the Christian faith somehow 'owns marriage' – and that kind of assumption is too easily made in my view - or worse still that the Church has always taken a lead position in the regulation of marriage, we ought to note that it was only as a result of the Council of Trent in 1563 that the requirement was set down that a priest should witness a marriage; and that the immediate response of Luther and Calvin (leaders of the Protestant Reformation from which Methodism ultimately grew) was to argue that the church should not be involved at all but rather that the legitimising of marriage should be purely a matter of State.

The first civil legislation around marriage in this country did not happen until 1753. It said that for a marriage to be legal and binding, it must be solemnised before an Anglican clergyman (there were exceptions for the Quakers and the Jews) and non-conformists argued (similarly to Luther and Calvin) that registration should be civil and not in church at all. This was agreed in the Marriage Act of 1836.

It was not until 1898 that marriages were actually allowed under the current arrangements with Authorised Persons, in non-conformist chapels.

So, Marriage as we understand it – and the solemnisation of Marriage in Church as we have it - is only part of historic heritage going back 120 years, but it has of course become a valued and cherished part of the life of the church and the ministry today.

Are we able to work with this simple definition of marriage to get us going?

“Marriage is a gift of God and that it is God’s intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman.”⁶³

Beyond that definition, we will need to explore the depths of commitment and the nature of relationship, but the definition does at least reflect the status quo for us, and therefore give us a simple platform from which to begin.

I have pondered long and hard about how I might structure this particular study and I have decided to use the Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET) document ‘Remaining Faithful’⁶⁴ and the associated Study Guide as our outline.

As the title of the paper suggests, the position of the MET document, although not by any means all of its membership, is that to interpret the Sacred Texts in ways other than those traditionally received, is to move away from clear teaching of Scripture and thus be ‘unfaithful’ to our Christian heritage. In the publication, there is little acknowledgement of the kinds of discussions we have shared in these Studies, which, to my mind, is a serious flaw in the contribution the document can make to the deliberations of the church as a whole. However, the paper is helpful in as much as its only focus is on an understanding of Marriage – and so helps keep us on track for this particular Study. Within the paper, there are a number of statements reflecting an understanding of marriage from a largely ‘non-affirming’ tradition. Re-framed as questions, these statements will serve as launch-pads for our exploration.

The introduction sets the context of our current position in the Methodist Church, when it says:

‘The Methodist Conference in 1993 reaffirmed the traditional teaching of the Church, ‘namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it’, calling for a pilgrimage of faith that would ‘give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality.’

While all Methodists would agree on the importance of recognising every person’s value, some argue that such a pilgrimage should lead to the acceptance of same-sex marriage.

In the light of such discussions, it is important for Methodists to return again to the Scriptures and seek wisdom from them as to the meaning of marriage.”⁶⁵

So what do we find there?

3.3 Is biblical marriage a union between a man and a woman?

The Study Guide begins with a clear statement that Biblical marriage is a union between a man and a woman. So, we will take that as our first affirmation, and explore it together.

The paper continues:

“The Bible is clear in its teaching on marriage.While it includes customs and traditions around marriage reflecting cultures and eras different from our own – and while the structure of family differed from contemporary models – the Bible teaches an understanding of marriage as a

⁶³ Methodist Standing Order 011A (1)

⁶⁴ Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET)

⁶⁵ Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET)

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permanent and exclusive union between a man and a woman which also provides the context for bearing and raising children.”

The roots of the marriage relationship lie in the creation of man and woman. Both male and female are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and yet are depicted as distinct and interdependent, reflecting the complementarity within the whole of creation. ..The binary distinction between male and female is incorporated into the design of creation, and reflected in the distinctions between heaven and earth, sea and sky, day and night.⁶⁶

So, first and foremost ‘Remaining Faithful’ asserts that biblical marriage is a union between a man and a woman.

And to assert that position significant weight is attached to the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2. I propose to introduce them here, but we will need to return to them through our study today.

John Stott comments on the opening chapters of Genesis that

“In his providence God has given us two distinct accounts of creation. The first (Genesis 1) is general, and affirms the equality of the sexes, since both share in the image of God and the stewardship of the earth. The second, (Genesis 2) is particular, and affirms the complementarity of the sexes, which constitute the basis for marriage being between two people of the opposite sex”⁶⁷

So first, Genesis chapter 1 – which Stott suggests affirms the equality of the sexes:

Genesis 1:26-28 (NIV2011)

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.”

Then Genesis 2, which Stott argues affirms the complementarity of the sexes – the significance of gender difference in marriage.

Genesis 2:7-25 (NIV2011)

⁷ Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

.....

¹⁸ The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

⁶⁶ Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET)

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⁶⁷ Stott, John

²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh.

²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

*²³ **The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."***

*²⁴ **That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.***

²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

'Remaining Faithful' reflects,

"Marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and so brings together the corresponding gifts and graces of man and woman together. Such a partnership between a man and a woman is a unique and necessary part of the marriage bond. Suggesting that marriage could be extended to same-sex couples ignores the corresponding gifts and graces of male and female that marriage requires".⁶⁸

Now, when we consider the opening chapters of Genesis, we often have to remind ourselves that the accounts are pre-history. In some sense they are creation poems reflecting on the mystery of the origins of all that is around us. And maybe some of us are very reluctant to take the descriptions of creation literally, although always acknowledging the incredible depth of spiritual insight that the creation narratives offer.

So, does the nature of the literature impact on the validity of the text interpretation in this regard? On this occasion, I don't think it does. I think what we have here at its most simple is the writer trying to make sense of the world around him. There are clear and obvious similarities between men and women, and equally there are clear and obvious dissimilarities. So, literal description or artistic spiritual poem, the fact of the matter is that basically half the population resemble 'Adam' and the other half resemble 'Eve'!

Male and female; man and women: it's just the way we are made. Is that the end of the argument when it comes to marriage? The natural world demonstrates that we are made to unite male and female in marriage as the traditional definitions and understanding present. End of argument?

Or is there another way to look at this.

I was interested to find this interpretation of the created order by Peter Aelred – who, if you recall from earlier Studies is an evangelical commentator and scholar who is affirming of same-sex relationships. I quote him at length, because like Tom Wright last week, he is trying to do his theology and we need to give him space to set it out for us:

"So when non-inclusive Christians say that according to our accounts in Genesis heterosexuality is God's original design, I'm inclined to agree. Anatomy does speak of compatibility and purpose....So while I am open to the possibility that same-sex orientations are part of God's diverse creation in a

way that is akin to racial diversity, it is still difficult for me to conceive of homosexuality as part of God's perfect plan for humanity.

There are just too many aspects about it that don't seem ideal, even beyond normal complimentary anatomy.

It is important to note though that there is a distinct difference between any disadvantages caused by homosexual orientation and whether any harm is actually caused by acting on it. Being disadvantaged from the Fall, doesn't mean attempts to seek happiness within the parameter of that disadvantage are necessarily sinful. We are all born with some disadvantages from the Fall, be it disease, in poverty or under oppression. Yet, good theology has historically never ordered people to permanently accept and suffer from their disadvantage.

- It is not a sin for the deaf to learn to communicate through sign language.
- It is not a sin for the poor to enjoy a luxury normally reserved for the rich.
- It is not a sin for a second-class citizen to work towards; political equality.

Why then is it a sin for someone with a homosexual orientation to pursue romantic relationships?

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Mark Achtemeier – another largely affirming commentator - also considers the clear evidence of the creation narratives and the natural world around us and acknowledges what he calls the 'majority pattern' for marriage illustrated in the Genesis accounts.

"Male and female bodies clearly do complement each other. And as a consequence, the union of male and female is clearly established as the majority pattern for love and marriage across the span of human history. It would be silly to try and claim otherwise. But acknowledging this obvious fact of human experience hardly settles the gay marriage question.

The mere existence of a majority pattern does not mean that all departures from this pattern are automatically off-limits and condemned."

We might ask in religious terms: "Does God's creation of male and female bodies in biological correspondence to each other means that God's condemnation automatically falls on alternative patterns of life like same-sex unions?"⁷⁰

For him at least, the question is an open one.

So if we assert that Biblical marriage is exclusively the covenantal partnership of a man and a woman, then it is clear that same-sex marriages cannot meet even that basic, entry-level requirement: and for some, that argument from the created order will be sufficient to close the case.

Others however, will be ready to acknowledge that whilst the story of Adam and Eve created male and female in the image of God, sets a 'majority pattern' for marriage in Scripture, it does not of itself mean that God's condemnation automatically falls upon every other expression of covenantal partnership – even if that partnership is forged between two people of the same gender.

⁶⁹ Aelred, Peter

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⁷⁰ Achtemeier, Mark

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3.4 Does Jesus confirm that biblical marriage is a union between a man and a woman?

Now the next one, I concede is a little controversial whichever side of the debate you may be sitting – so stay with me.

Central to the Remaining Faithful paper and the non-affirming case proposed by Methodist Evangelicals Together is an assertion that Jesus himself defines marriage as between one man and one woman.

The document states:

“When asked a question about marriage, Jesus answered quoting the words from Genesis 1.27 and 2.24 and expanded them saying:

*‘Haven’t you read, ‘he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said ‘for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.’*⁷¹

Now, if you were to look up that Passage in Matthew 19 or Mark 10, you will discern very quickly that it is misleading (at the very least) to suggest that Jesus gave this response when asked about marriage. In context this is exposed as lazy scholarship because the actual question asked of Jesus was not about marriage, but about divorce, an error which was interestingly corrected by the time the Study Guide was released.

The paper now reads:

“When we turn to the New Testament, we find that Jesus affirms the teaching of Genesis on marriage. When asked his view on divorce, Jesus directs his hearers to God the Father’s original plan for marriage (Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 19:3-12).”⁷²

The conservative scholar John Stott curiously also chooses to press this verse into service as a condemnation of same-sex marriage when he writes:

It is of the utmost importance that Jesus himself later endorsed the Old Testament definition of marriage”

“In doing so, he introduced it with the words from Genesis 1.27 (that’s the creator made hem male and female) and concluded with his own comment (‘Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate’) Matt 19.6”⁷³

Achtemeier counters with:

“The attempt to claim Jesus’ quotation from Genesis for the modern debate about gay marriage is actually quite ironic, because the conversation in which they occur is about heterosexual divorce”

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⁷¹ Methodist Evangelical Together

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⁷² Methodist Evangelical Together

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⁷³ Stott, John

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⁷⁴ Achtemeier, Mark

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Trying to offer a balance of serious scholarship Peter Aelred comments:

“Even for the most conservative evangelical, the problem with this line of thinking should be obvious. Jesus is clearly not making an argument for heterosexuality. No one in the story is questioning heterosexuality. The pharisees essentially want to know if it’s mortally acceptable to divorce and aging or annoying wife and upgrade to a newer model. Jesus is making a beautiful argument that we should all affirm, but the argument is for the sacredness of relational and sexual commitment within the marriage covenant.”⁷⁵

In fact, given everything that we have already said about the status of marriage in the time of Jesus and the complete lack of any concept of sexual orientation as opposed to homosexual activity, you will probably not be surprised that Jesus has nothing to say about same sex relationships – and we need to make our case from other sources.

We do of course have a view of marriage and loyalty and sexual ethics from Jesus’ teaching, but we are left with the now familiar challenge of trying to understand those ethical principles in a way that we can apply them to our context and current discussions.

3.5 Is biblical marriage a gift of God?

With the anatomical differences between man and women clearly established and acknowledged, we need to ask if those differences were the primary factor in the creation of human beings with ‘marriage’ in view. Clearly, in terms of the first humans, there was a need to procreate and we will return to that shortly, but we pause now just to acknowledge a different perspective within those verses from Genesis chapter 2: a perspective that the MET Study Guide highlights under the affirmation that ‘Marriage is a gift’.

John Stott observes from the chapter:

“God has created us social beings. Since he is love, and has made us in his own likeness, he has given us the capacity to love and be loved. He intends us to live in community, not in solitude”⁷⁶

As we read the Creation narratives there is a recurring phrase – a mantra. In the first two chapters of the Bible God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. And with each part of creation, the writer observed that after God had created, he looked and declared that ‘it was good’. Then, after completing his creation,

‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good’ (Genesis 1.31)

But as affirming and non-affirming scholars indicate together, there was one thing that God declared ‘*not good*’ when he observed it. God said in Genesis 2.18:

‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper for him’.

And the next part of the story tells how (because there was no suitable helper to be found amongst the animals) God put Adam to sleep and fashioned a partner from his rib, creating the first woman.

⁷⁵ Aelred, Peter

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⁷⁶ Stott, John

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Victor Hamilton writing in his Eerdmans's Commentary highlights the creation of Eve as equal partner. The Hebrew translating the word helper for him, occurs only here and verse 20 and literally means '*will correspond to him*'. Thus, the new creation will be neither inferior nor superior to Adam – but equal. In a curious turn of phrase, the word 'helper' is actually masculine in Hebrew, although it is a woman in reality.⁷⁷

Matthew Vines comments on the same passage:

"Non-affirming Christians generally argue that the creation of Adam and Eve reveals the limits of God's blessings for sexual relationships: one man and one woman. Yes, Adam and Eve were an opposite-sex couple, as was necessary for them to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (Genesis 1.28). But the account of Eve's creation doesn't emphasise Adam's need to procreate. It emphasises instead his need for relationship"⁷⁸

God responded to Adam's loneliness – not by giving him a group of friends to hang out with – but by giving him a spouse: a partner: a companion with whom to share life.

Vines continues:

"What is remarkable about Genesis 2 is that despite the need for procreation, the text doesn't focus on the gender differences between Adam and Eve. Rather, it focusses on their similarity as human beings."⁷⁹

One essential element in Biblical marriage, according to scholars from across the theological, affirming and non-affirming spectrum is the need for companionship at the deepest human and spiritual level. Non-affirming Christians will want to suggest that opposite sex complementarity is essential in that emotional and human compatibility. Affirming Christians would suggest that being 'a suitable helper' does not rely on gender differences, but on love, companionship, understanding: being a 'soul mate'. In this regard, affirming Christians would suggest that in this element same-sex marriages are able to model Biblical marriage as it is traditionally understood.

3.6 Is biblical marriage about fruitfulness?

Remaining Faithful asserts:

"Marriage is about fruitfulness, which includes the fruitfulness of man and woman in giving birth to children and raising them. It is only man and woman together who can conceive a child, and so marriage is 'procreative' in a way that is unique and God-given.

While not all couples are able to have children, many such couples choose to adopt or foster children, and all couples – regardless of whether or not they have children – can be fruitful in partnering together to serve God within the world."⁸⁰

The Marriage Service in the Methodist Worship Book affirms:

⁷⁷ Hamilton, Victor P.

The Book of Genesis chapters 1-17

page 178

Eerdmans

⁷⁸ Vines, Matthew

God and the gay Christian

page 45

Convergent Books

⁷⁹ Vines, Matthew

God and the gay Christian

page 46

Convergent Books

⁸⁰ Ash, Christopher

Marriage: Sex in the Service of God.

page 112-132

Inter-Varsity Press

“It is the will of God that marriage should be honoured as a way of life, in which we may know the security of love and care and grow towards maturity. Through such marriage children may be nurtured, family life strengthened, and human society enriched” ⁸¹

Is procreation an essential element of biblical marriage – and if it is, does this therefore exclude same sex couples who cannot – without medical intervention at least – produce children?

Matthew Vines comments:

“One reason many non-affirming Christians believe gender difference is essential to marriage is the obvious one: only a man and woman can biologically procreate

Genesis 1:26-29 (NIV2011)

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

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

Does Biblical marriage need to at least hold out the possibility of procreation??

Since same-sex couples cannot increase in number through biological reproduction, does that prevent their relationship from fulfilling the Bible’s basis for marriage?

Does sex, in order to be moral, need at least to offer the possibility of reproduction?” ⁸²

A number of scholars, including Vines and Aelred underline the significance of procreation in the Old Testament. The promise of God to Abraham was that his family would be huge, his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. And when that promise was restated to Isaac and Jacob again, God emphasised the promise of physical offspring.

So, the command to ‘*be fruitful*’ in Genesis became linked with the promise to and of God’s people. Procreation was important. But, even so, it is doubtful that it can be said to be of primary importance in marriage.

As we have observed, in the original creation story, procreation is not presented as the primary purpose of marriage. Whilst Genesis 1.28 does say ‘be fruitful and multiply’, Genesis 2 never mentions procreation when describing the first marriage.

Vines comments

“And despite the significance of procreation in the Old Testament, infertile marriages were not considered illegitimate. The marriages of Sarah and Abraham (Genesis 18) and Elkanah and Hannah (1 Samuel 1) were valid even in the long days before they had a child.” ⁸³

Mark Achtemeier reflects,

“Though the Bible clearly views procreation as a blessing, nowhere is there even a hint suggesting that procreation is an essential requirement for a marriage to be considered legitimate in the eyes

⁸¹ Methodist Worship Book

⁸² Vines, Matthew

⁸³ Vines, Matthew

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TMCP

Convergent Books

Convergent Books

of God. No regulations appear anywhere in scripture suggesting that infertile people or persons past the age of childbearing should refrain from getting married. Nowhere is there a suggestion that a marriage that continues childless somehow lacks legitimacy for that reason.⁸⁴

Vines again,

“In the New Testament too, Jesus may have made just one exception to his prohibition of divorce, saying that a couple could divorce in the case of infidelity (Matthew 19.9) BUT he made no exception for couples unable to bear children. In Jesus understanding therefore, covenantal commitment is foundational. The ability to bear children was not’⁸⁵

Remaining Faithful itself, highlights that the birth of children is celebrated in scripture and is considered a delight (Psalm 127 and 127),

“Marriage is also the context for giving birth and raising children, as the Psalms particularly emphasise (Psalm 127 - 128).”⁸⁶

Psalm 127:1-5 (NIV2011)

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

²*In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves.*

³*Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him.*

⁴*Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth.*

⁵*Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.*

Psalm 128:1-6 (NIV2011)

¹*Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in obedience to him.*

²*You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours.*

³*Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.*

⁴*Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the LORD.*

⁵*May the LORD bless you from Zion; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.*

⁶*May you live to see your children’s children— peace be on Israel.*

But the paper also underlines that the joy of sex in marriage goes beyond the limited purposes of procreation when it comments:

“Marriage in the Bible is celebrated for the gifts that it brings. Sexual union is a good gift of God, with the Song of Songs especially celebrating the physical union between husband and wife.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Achtemeier, Mark	The Bible’s YES to same-sex marriage	page 59	WJK
⁸⁵ Vines, Matthew	God and gay Christian	page 141	Convergent Books
⁸⁶ Methodist Evangelicals Together	Remaining Faithful Study Guide	page 9	in house printing
⁸⁷ Methodist Evangelicals Together	Remaining Faithful Study Guide	page 7	in house printing

Clearly, the Song of Songs does not have procreation in view in its glorious poetry; it's about sensuality and intimacy and the sheer joy of sexual exploration and experience!!

The apostle Paul is not perhaps one who comes over as particularly sexually liberated in his writing, often equating sexual expression with the inability to control the excess of the physical body.

However, in 1 Corinthians 7 even he encouraged married couples to have sex 'so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control'

Paul never suggested that sex was only or even primarily for the purpose of procreation.

Vines, sum up the affirming position in this regard:

"From a theological perspective, marriage primarily involves a covenant-keeping relationship of mutual self-giving that reflects God's love for us. The evidence that we have considered here indicates that marriage is only secondarily – and not necessarily at all – about having biological children. Same sex couple's inability to procreate does not exclude them from fulfilling the Bible's basis for marriage' ⁸⁸

3.7 Is biblical marriage the best context for sexual relationships?

'Remaining Faithful' asserts that Marriage in Scripture is the context for sexual relationships.

"While our culture depicts a sexual relationship as either the ultimate means of fulfilment or simply as the satisfaction of a physical need, neither is true. Sexuality is a means of strengthening the marital bond, and is to be celebrated within the context of a marriage relationship."

While sexuality is a good gift, the Bible confines sexual intimacy to the marriage relationship. ⁸⁹

Our discussion here is about the extent to which Same Sex marriage can reflect the Biblical standards of marriage – and it is not about boundaries of sexual expression per se. That is another topic which requires careful study and reflection of scripture in context (and is at least in part considered in the Methodist Conference Report, 2019 "God in love unites us: The Report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group").

But for the discussion in view of course, there is little disagreement here between affirming or non-affirming Christians. In *this* discussion, in *this* context non-affirming people want to state that covenantal marriage relationship is the godly context for sexual relationships and those same sex couples in covenantal relationships declare: 'we agree, so let us get married with the blessing of the Church'!

3.8 Is biblical marriage about faithfulness?

And, as if different sides of the same coin, folk in same-sex covenantal relationships want to affirm that marriage is the proper context for sexual activity, precisely because they want to affirm faithfulness and

⁸⁸ Vines, Matthew

God and gay Christian

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Convergent Books

⁸⁹ Methodist Evangelicals Together Remaining Faithful Study Guide

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monogamy as key priorities in developing committed relationships. And the declaration that Biblical marriage is about faithfulness is the next principle affirmed by Remaining Faithful.

Wilson, in one of the few considerations of the subject from a contemporary perspective, questions the commitment of same-sex couples to faithful monogamy. In a passage which does not, I think, do the author or his argument great credit, he asserts that because the sexual union between gay couples differs anatomically from that experienced by heterosexual male female couples in marriage, the union is somehow less binding.

“This is why most same-sex marriages tend not to be exclusive. The most common, statistically speaking are ‘open relationships’ in which partners agree to the terms of not being sexually exclusive”⁹⁰

Fascinatingly, Wilson goes on to try and support these outrageous statements with evidence from the American context, gathered from social studies and interviews from *before* the legalisation of same-sex marriage on either side of the Atlantic! It is not unreasonable to assume therefore that, even if the evidence was sound at the time it was gathered, the introduction of marriage as a legal possibility for same-sex couples may well have strengthened the covenantal bond and encourages fidelity – in much the same way that the traditionalist position suggests that the marriage bond encourages faithfulness in heterosexual relationships.

“Marriage is about the faithfulness of husband and wife to one another, and so Christians are called to commit to marriage for life.”⁹¹ says Remaining Faithful

Again, there will be no dissent from those in committed same-sex relationships on this matter. No affirming person is suggesting that the case for same-sex marriage is furthered by an appeal to promiscuity in the gay community (the ‘gay life-style’ as it has become known). Quite the opposite is true of course. Those in committed same-sex covenantal relationships are seeking affirmation for same-sex marriages precisely because they want to affirm the faithfulness within their relationships; and they too are most comfortable with sexual expression within the formalised marriage commitment.

Those affirming same-sex marriage would argue that the same degree of faithfulness is possible within same-sex relationships as within heterosexual commitments.

However, just around the corner a very different perspective between affirming and non-affirming proponents comes into view. And the disagreement comes around the area of marriage and singleness as two valid and celebrated expressions of human life and living.

3.9 Do marriage and singleness represent two vital callings within Christian life?

The next affirmation set out in ‘Remaining Faithful’ is necessarily tangential to our main discussion as to the extent to which same sex couples can fulfil a biblical model of marriage, because this assertion is set firmly within the framework that they cannot. It addresses how Christian homosexual men and Christian

⁹⁰ Wilson, Todd

⁹¹ Methodist Evangelicals Together

Mere sexuality

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lesbian women should live in view of the fact that they cannot - according to non-affirming believers - marry.

Because non-affirming people believe that marriage is the life-long union of one man and one woman, they are not open to the possibility that same-sex couples can be married. Therefore, the argument goes, there is not an appropriate relationship within which sexual relationships can be shared in a same sex relationship.

Remaining Faithful therefore asserts that marriage alongside singleness are two callings within Christian life, and presents the position as follows:

“The Christian view of sexual relationships has always held that there are two states in life: a married life and a single life. While in some contexts the single life has been seen as superior, others within the Church today seem to suggest that marriage is God’s ‘best’ and a gift for all. ⁹²

As Jesus and Paul show, celibate singleness can be an honourable way to serve God too. Unlike many Jews at the time, Jesus spoke of the single life as a way to follow God. While some are called to marriage, others are called to singleness (Matthew 19:12). God sanctifies singleness as well as marriage. ⁹³

Restating the non-affirming position, Remaining Faithful again:

“the current Methodist view on marriage – a union of one man and one woman – is faithful to the Bible. It is in light of the high biblical view of marriage that the Bible prohibits other forms of sexual behaviour that some now seek to bless. At the same time, the Bible shows that marriage is not the only calling for those who seek to follow Christ. Singleness too is praised and valued as a means to glorify God.” ⁹⁴

1 Corinthians 7:32-35 (ANIV)

³² I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. ³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— ³⁴ and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Pauls understanding was that the work of the Gospel was so urgent, that distractions should be avoided. So, he suggested, if you’re not married, don’t get married – just focus on the work of the Lord because you can be especially effective then. It’s not the end of the world if you don’t get married!

It’s an odd argument to our hearing I think (the wonderful art of the understatement). But in the context of the ‘soon expected return’ of Jesus – it made some missional sense, even if we would struggle to see any relational sense!

⁹² Methodist Evangelicals Together

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⁹³ Methodist Evangelicals Together

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⁹⁴ Methodist Evangelicals Together

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But the larger point – in the context of our discussion is that singleness is celebrated in parts of scripture as a gift from God in the same way that marriage is celebrated.

But not only singleness – but celibacy!

To put the traditional argument in a nutshell: sexual relationships are for marriage; as a homosexual man (or lesbian woman) you cannot get married according to our definition, and so therefore you should refrain from sexual activity.

This argument reflects what has become a popular position amongst the non-affirming Christian community, and actually represents a significant sea-change in perspective. There is now an increasing acceptance that homosexual orientation is not chosen but given: it is not a lifestyle choice for most, but rather a genetic conditioning – a settled orientation. But as homosexual activity is necessarily outside the biblical concept of marriage (says the non-affirming position), it must be a sexual expression that does not find favour with God. So, homosexual men and lesbian women should avoid sexual relationships. Same sex individuals and couples should willingly accept celibacy as a gift from God and as a spiritual discipline.

And Paul does indeed present celibacy as a positive spiritual position – but interestingly of course, he teaches celibacy *within* marriage!

1 Corinthians 7:1-5 (NIV2011)

¹ Now for the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.

³ The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.

⁴ 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.

Celibacy as a gift.

But, significantly perhaps in our discussion, as a voluntary and temporary gift.

Matthew Vines reflects on the incredible weight of the demand for celibacy placed upon gay couples by non-affirming believers.

“The traditional interpretation of scripture as currently applied, calls all Christians to abstinence before marriage. But it goes much further when applied to gay Christians, denying the very possibility of marriage. According to non-affirming Christians, gay people’s sexuality is completely broken, so mandatory, lifelong celibacy in their only real option! Celibacy has a long honoured history in the Christian church....but there is a problem. Christians throughout history have affirmed that lifelong celibacy is a spiritual gift and calling, not a path that should be forced on someone” ⁹⁵

Yes of course there have been people who have accepted life-long celibacy, Romans Catholic priests being the most common example for us. But even that example illustrates for us the considerable discipline required if human beings are to deny sexual desire and negate sexual intimacy. But Vines argument is that members of the celibate priesthood voluntarily accepted such a life when they accepted the call to the priesthood. They had the choice as to whether to follow that call or not. Celibacy was not externally imposed as a draconian measure to suppress expressions of sexuality, but rather voluntarily received as part of an acceptance of a priestly call.

Heterosexual men and women can choose to adopt a celibate lifestyle either before, after or during marriage. But for them, there remains always the potential to move beyond that choice. But that is not the case for unmarried gay people. Under the terms of the traditionalist position, a gay man or lesbian woman - who is prevented from marrying - effectively has celibacy imposed.

If we note the voluntary nature of celibacy in Paul's writings, we should also note carefully the temporary nature of such a condition within a long-term relationship. If, in marriage there was a mutually agreed and voluntary period of celibacy for a spiritual purpose, then, at the end of that time normal sexual relations recommenced. It was never intended to be a permanent condition.

⁵ 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. (1 Corinthians 7.5)

So argues Vines, the suggestion that celibacy should be imposed and permanent, moves away from the fundamental Biblical understanding of celibacy as a spiritual discipline:

“We can embrace gay relationships and maintain the traditional view of celibacy, or we can change our understanding of celibacy and keep a traditional view of gay relationships. We cannot do both. Christians who hold a high view of Scripture must decide which tradition to modify!”⁹⁶

3.10 Does biblical marriage reflect something of God?

The final assertion from ‘Remaining Faithful’ that we need to consider is the suggestion that in marriage we can reflect something of God – his heart and his covenantal commitment to humanity.

The covenant relationship in marriage, prefigures the covenant relationship between Christ and his church.

“Marriage can and does reflect something of God. As Paul shows in Ephesians 5:31-32, the mystery of marriage can be applied to Christ and the Church, or as one Methodist Statement on marriage puts it, marriage can be ‘seen as a reflection of the life of eternity, in which we may experience the presence of God in a daily dying and rising to self and to the partner.’”⁹⁷

In one of the most profound images in Scripture, Paul sees marriage as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church

Ephesians 5:21-33 (NIV2011)

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own

⁹⁶ Vines, Matthew

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Convergent Books

⁹⁷ Methodist Evangelicals Together

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husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.

²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body.

³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

As Remaining Faithful notes:

“Just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, so Paul calls husbands to love their wives sacrificially (Ephesians 5:25-28). The one-flesh union of man and woman in marriage, Paul argues, is a ‘great mystery’, but one that applies to Christ and the Church. In a deeply mysterious way, the union of a man and a woman in their gendered difference can represent the union of God and humanity”⁹⁸

Mark Achtemeier counters:

We can see how (Ephesians 5.21-33) confirms God’s intention for marriage to help us grow into the divine image of God’s love for us.....The passage identifies the goal of marriage as growing into the kind of love that unites Jesus to the church. This growth in self-giving Christ-like love is what it means for human beings to realise the potential of our creation in the image of God ⁹⁹

So, affirming Christians argue that this elevation of covenantal commitment, and ever-deepening love between partners in marriage (reflecting the covenantal and self-giving love of Christ for his Church), does not require those partners to be of opposite genders. If ‘Remaining Faithful asserts “the union of a man and a woman in their gendered difference can represent the union of God and humanity”, those holding an affirming position would argue that ‘gendered difference’ is not of primary importance in the image, but rather the quality of self-giving love and the depth of relationship.

Reflecting further on the beautiful scriptural images of Christ and his church ‘Remaining Faithful’ takes us into the final book of the Bible and highlights the ‘Bride and Groom’ relationship between the Church and Christ.

In the final book of the Bible, marriage is used as a symbol of the relationship between God and humanity. Revelation 21 depicts the ‘marriage supper of the lamb’ (Revelation 19:9), the time in which the new Jerusalem – filled with saints old and new – descends from heaven ‘as a bride adorned for her husband’

⁹⁸ Methodist Evangelicals Together

⁹⁹ Achtemeier, Mark

(Revelation 21:2). Just as an earthly wedding unites man and woman in a time of celebration, so the future hope is that heaven and earth will again unite and so show forth the glory and wonder of God.¹⁰⁰

Revelation 19:7 (NIV2011)

⁷ Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

Revelation 21:1-2 (NIV2011)

¹ Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Revelation 21:9 (NIV2011)

⁹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

As NT Wright notes,

‘Marriage is a sign of all things in heaven and on earth coming together in Christ.’¹⁰¹

So, does this image of the convergence of redeemed creation as a form of marriage between heaven and earth, between the Church and Christ, have anything to add to our consideration of same-sex marriage?

Some affirming believers will see in this account further evidence that the validity of marriage in Scripture cannot be determined by cold and calculated gender alone, because here in the fullest relationship between Christ and the Church, the Church is now described as the Bride. The church self-evidently contains men as well as women. How then, the argument goes, is it possible to contend that the Biblical model for marriage is exclusively one man and one woman, when even the ecclesiastical Bride is not gender exclusive!

Non-affirming believers will counter this suggestion by arguing that we are not intended to take this image literally, but symbolically, which then raising the question ‘what then, is the symbolic truth contained therein?’. The contention is then, that biblical marriage reflects something of the heart of God in terms of covenantal commitment and self-giving love. The non-affirming position sees the marriage of man and a woman in ‘their gendered difference’¹⁰² as key to the faithful fulfilment of this obligation. Those of an affirming disposition argue that ‘gendered difference’ is not an essential element in the quality of a marriage that is built on the depth of relationship and sacrificial, loving commitment.

So, affirming scholars would contend,

“Same-sex marriage does nothing to undermine the bride of Christ metaphor, but rather by the covenantal nature of marriage, affirms the very essence of it.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Methodist Evangelicals Together publishing

¹⁰¹ Wright, NT

¹⁰² Methodist Evangelicals Together

¹⁰³ Aelred, Peter

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3.11 The language of one flesh

As I draw the study towards its close, I want to draw attention to a phrase that has recurred often in our passages of Scripture: the language of *'one flesh'* – which seems to be an important one, as we try to consider if the biblical model of marriage can be met in a same-sex context.

Ephesians 5 includes a quotation from Genesis 2.24 which describes how

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

John Stott takes us back to the extended passage and contends that the triple use of the word 'flesh' in the Genesis 2 account is significant.

Genesis 2:20-25 (NIV2011)

²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

"Even the inattentive reader will be struck by the three references to flesh: 'This is flesh of my flesh....they become one flesh'. We may be certain that this is deliberate, not accidental. It teaches that sexual intercourse in opposite sex marriage is more than a union: it is kind of reunion" (pg. 36)

It is not a union of alien persons who do not belong to one another and can't appropriately become one flesh. On the contrary, it is a union of two persons who originally were one, were then separated from each other, and now, in the sexual encounter of marriage come together again.

Sexual intercourse in marriage is therefore much more than a union of bodies; it is blending of complementary personalities through which the rich created oneness of human beings is experienced again. ¹⁰⁴

Kevin DeYoung agrees.

"The ish (man) and Ishah (woman) can become one flesh because theirs is not just a sexual union, but a reunion, the bringing together of two differentiated beings, with one made from and both made for the other"¹⁰⁵

Todd Wilson takes the idea further when he writes,

"That's why Scripture refers to marriage as a 'one-flesh' union, not a one-heart, or one-spirit or one-soul union. The language of 'one flesh' is meant to be a very specific, concrete reference to your flesh, your physical body. But frankly, we should be even more specific. The one-flesh union here is not just the uniting of bodies in some general way, like exchanging hugs or holding hands. It refers to the coming together of two bodies in a very specific way. The old-fashioned term for this

¹⁰⁴ Stott, John

Same Sex Relationships

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Good Book Company

¹⁰⁵ DeYoung, Kevin

What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality? Page 28

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coming together is coitus, the less old-fashioned terms is intercourse, and today we just call it sex. Its what church tradition and common law have for centuries seen as the consummation of the marriage. Men and women have one, and only one, bodily organ that has been specifically designed for a complement, and when these two organs – the male and female sexual organs – come together to perform one unified and unifying act, they form a one-flesh union quite literally, physically, indeed even biologically”¹⁰⁶

Non-affirming interpreters, therefore, argue that the sexual aspect of marriage is not merely a union between two partners, but a reunion of two particular and anatomically distinct bodies that originally came from the same flesh. Because same sex couples share the same anatomy, this argument continues, they cannot become ‘one flesh’ in the biblical sense.

So, are non-affirming scholars correct in emphasising the sexual dimension of the ‘one-flesh’ unity?

James Brownson¹⁰⁷ argues that this interpretation oversexualises the phrase ‘one flesh’. In the Bible the word ‘flesh’ is used metaphorically to describe ties of kinship. Brownson illustrates the point with a number of scriptural examples including Genesis 29.14, which recounts how Laban, on learning that Jacob was his relative exclaimed ‘Surely you are my bone and my flesh’

The covenantal relationship of the phrase ‘one flesh’ is underlined by Hamilton in his commentary on the Genesis 2 passage. But it is interesting to note that – writing in a time long before the position of affirming or non-affirming scholarship was in view - Hamilton wrote:

‘Now covenantally joined with his wife, the man and his spouse ‘become one flesh’. Nothing is said yet about any procreating roles that this couple shall assume. The man does not leave one family to start another family. What is being pinpointed is solidarity. A man by himself is not one flesh. A woman by herself is not one flesh.”¹⁰⁸

So, the emphasis of the phrase ‘*became one flesh*’ for Hamilton is not about sexual union per se but rather about covenantal commitment in which two people become one. In this regard, it might be argued that anatomical differences – the place where we began to explore marriage in the Garden of Eden a while back - *is not* of primary importance after all in the Bible’s understanding of marriage.

To explore this further, we need to reintroduce the Ephesians 5 passage to our deliberations and note the deliberate placing of the ‘one flesh’ imagery within it. The ‘one-flesh’ concept is used to illustrate the ‘mysterious’ relationship between Christ and his church. It is surely indefensible to suggest that the use of the term ‘one flesh’ here is intended to sexualise the union between the Church and Christ. Such an idea is unthinkable. This can only be a reference to the glorious, covenantal commitment of Christ to his people, which is expressed in the kind of self-giving love previously exalted as desirable in the earlier descriptions of human marriage.

Todd Wilson, in an oft cited defence of the traditional, *non-affirming* position, concludes his chapter considering ‘one-flesh union’ with this intriguing paragraph:

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, Todd	Mere sexuality	page 80	Zondervan
¹⁰⁷ Brownson, James	Bible, Gender, Sexuality		Eerdmans
¹⁰⁸ Hamilton, Victor	The Book of Genesis chapter 1-17	page 181	Eerdmans

“If bodily union isn’t an essential part of your definition of marriage, then you won’t have a basis – again, apart from citing Scripture – for opposing same-sex marriage. If marriage is about finding your soul mate or sharing life together with your best friend, there is no reason two people of the same sex can’t do that and be married according to your definition. Apart from quoting the bible, your only argument against this type of marriage is, well, personal preference” ¹⁰⁹

So, what is the key factor in the ‘one flesh’ fulfilment of the marriage relationship? Is it as Stott, DeYoung and Wilson seem to argue, the (re)union of a man and a woman through a particular sexual act? Or is that just one part (and maybe not even a necessary part) of the deepest relationship between two human beings, who seek to embody

“the life-long unity of heart, body and mind: comfort and companionship; enrichment and encouragement; tenderness and trust” ¹¹⁰

Our liturgies certainly seem to suggest that what *is* of primary importance is the covenantal commitment between the partners. A commitment that expresses itself in mutual companionship, loyalty, faithfulness, and fidelity – to the exclusion of all others. A covenantal commitment that perseveres through difficulties and always seeks the best for the covenant partner. And in doing this, so begin to reflect something of the heart of God himself.

Study 3: Summary

So where have we been in this Study?

- We have noted that the historic (status quo) definition for marriage within the Methodist Church is that *‘marriage is a gift of God and that it is God’s intention that a marriage should be the life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman’* – and we have noted that Genesis chapters 1 and 2 contain key texts in the reaching of that understanding.
- We have noted that affirming scholars accept that the *‘majority pattern for marriage’* within Scripture is indeed one man and one woman, as illustrated in the anatomical compatibility of Adam and Eve. But we have also noted their suggestion that that does not necessarily mean that every other expression of covenantal relationship is unacceptable to God nor that it is necessarily inappropriate to seek to build meaningful relationship outside of the ‘majority pattern’.
- We have noted the primary reason for the creation of Eve as a companion for Adam and that procreation – though highly important in the Old Testament narrative - was not an expressed priority in Genesis 2 and that indeed the inability to procreate was never regarded as invalidating biblical marriage in Scripture.
- We have noted that the Bible celebrates ‘singleness’ as a gift from God for some people.
- We have noted that if we affirm marriage as the most appropriate context within which sexual relations take place and we do not extend the possibility of Christian marriage to same sex couples then we are in effect imposing compulsory and permanent celibacy upon them – thus, according to

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, Todd Mere sexuality

¹¹⁰ Methodist Worship Book marriage service

affirming Christians, stepping outside the Biblical limitations for celibacy as voluntary and temporary periods of abstinence as a specific spiritual disciple.

- And finally, we have explored the relationship between God's covenantal relationship with the Church through Jesus and the self-giving covenantal relationships in human marriage. We have discovered that the language of 'one flesh;' in the Genesis texts as well as the New Testament occurrences, may have been overstated in terms of sexual expression and is perhaps more about confirming kinship and the covenant relationship – of which sexual union is but one, precious, part.

We started this final Study with two questions:

- Can we identify a consistent understanding of marriage in scripture?

And

- To what extent are committed, faithful same sex relationships able to match the principles of such a marriage and where – if anywhere – do such relationships fall short?

And as I conclude this series, those are the questions that I leave with you, for your prayers and consideration.

4.0 Endpiece

The purpose of this paper has not been to make you ‘change your mind’ – whatever mind was yours at the outset – but rather to illustrate that a sincere and serious struggle with Scripture will not necessarily result in every person reaching the same conclusion. I contend that, when different people draw different conclusions from a careful study of Scripture it does not inevitably mean that someone isn’t being faithful to the Bible as God’s Word. What is important is to ask searching questions of the text and context in an attempt to discern what the ‘Spirit is saying to the Churches.’ If, as my Studies may suggest, it is far from clear what ‘faithful interpretation’ looks like in our context – or at least, what conclusions ‘faithful interpretation’ leads us to – then other considerations of the Gospel need also to be taken into consideration. What does our understanding of Kingdom purpose and the evangel of the Church have to say to our debate? That discussion is for another paper and another day perhaps.

My prayer is that even in places where we cannot all agree, as sisters and brothers in Christ, we can still relate graciously for the glory of God and the good of the Kingdom.

At the outset of these Studies I set out my fear that the Methodist Church in Great Britain might be torn asunder by an inability to hold one another in love and grace, and that our disagreement over an ecclesiastical response to the reality of same-sex marriage in the UK could cause untold schism and damage. I still hold that fear, with a heavy and saddened heart.

But, as I have read, written and reflected, a further realisation has dawned; something a whole lot bigger than the future of a Methodist Connexion. There is something very significant at play here – and it is a lesson that the people of the United Kingdom are slowly realising as the conundrum of Brexit continues. There is a growing understanding that whilst the nation, its politicians, its media and its people are fixated on the issue of Brexit and how it can be made to a) happen b) not happen or c) happen quickly, nothing else is getting done. The usual processes of Government are effectively suspended whilst every last joule of energy, every last second of time, and every last talent and gift is focussed on the single, all-encompassing problem and how to resolve it. And the impact of getting nothing done and absorbing energy, time and talent, is having a dreadful effect on all strata of society, especially the most vulnerable amongst us. Brexit has come to loom so large, that nothing else seems to matter anymore.

My fear is that the resolution of questions around ‘same-sex’ marriage for the Methodist Church in Great Britain is for us, a sort of ecclesiastical Brexit. We know that no solution will satisfy everyone; we know that deep rooted hurts and fears colour our perspective: and many of us are now digging into our moral, ethical and scriptural trenches (on ‘both’ sides of the debate – if we can consider this in such stark binary terms) from which we will simply shout arguments at one another without pausing to hear and consider anything ‘the other’ is saying. And meantime, some important stuff just isn’t getting done. Like making disciples of Jesus; like challenging injustice in our nation: like standing up against immoral regimes worldwide; like being proper stewards of the planet and holding to account those who refuse to be; like feeding the poor; and holding the hand of the fatherless, the homeless and the rootless. Kingdom stuff.

Oh, please do not misunderstand me, I am not suggesting that the matters in hand are not significant or that our resolution of those matters are not important. They are: not least because, as I have tried to highlight, the nature of Scripture, its authority and its responsible interpretation of Scripture as God’s Word rests at the centre of our conversations. But I just wonder if history will judge this moment as significant enough to effectively suspend the work of the Kingdom to argue about! After all, as we have discovered, Jesus said nothing about ‘same sex marriage’ – but he said an awful lot about the other stuff!!

So, I am left with an uncomfortable gospel question: what is not getting done for Jesus, because we are doing this? It's a cliché I know - and I really do hesitate to use it here because it is so overused, even if, like many clichés it has a depth and a value if considered with gravitas and sincerity - but I find myself asking the question 'What would Jesus do?'

MDW June 2019

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