

Bethany Presbyterian Church

(The reflection below on the Historical and Emerging Viewpoints regarding same-sex relationships was part of Bethany's Roundtable presentation in Fall, 2015: Gay Christians, The Bible, Church and culture)

In the church, the number of opinions on homosexuality are legion. Outlined below, are two major views I'm calling, simply for clarity, The Historical Viewpoint and An Emerging Viewpoint.

(Some of this material is from Jeff Lincicome's "Sammamish Presbyterian Church All Church Conversations on Homosexuality: Theological Primer, May 4 and 7, 2014")

The Historical Viewpoint

- The Historical Viewpoint argues that, according to the Bible, homosexual activity is not God's original intention or design. The Bible sees homosexual acts as universally negative and sinful in all their physical expressions, consistently lifting up heterosexual marriage as normative and God's plan for sexual relationships. There are six passages in the Bible that mention same-gender sex and they are all negative.
- Interestingly enough, although Emerging scholars would argue about whether all these scripture passages are applicable to today's discussion, they too would agree that these scripture passages speak with one voice and it is negative.
 - *"Whatever the interpretation of these (Bible) passages, however, it has to be acknowledged that nowhere does the Bible actually affirm same-gender relationships." – Steven Chalke, p. 4*
- Still, the Historical viewpoint would not classify same-gender relationships as a worse sin than any other. In Romans 1, the most extensive passage on homosexual acts in the Bible, homosexual activity is one in a list of sins including envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossip, slander, boasting and more.
- The Historical viewpoint acknowledges that Jesus had nothing to say about same-gender relationships. However, while others might take this to signal Jesus did not care, the Historical viewpoint would argue that Jesus' thinking was most probably simply in line with the view of his day. That is, an argument from silence is hard to make. The debate we are having today just was not part of the 1st century landscape.
 - *"If Jesus or his followers had practiced or countenanced homosexuality, it would have been profoundly scandalous within first-century Jewish culture. Such a controversy would surely have left traces in the tradition, as did Jesus' practice of having table fellowship with prostitutes and tax collectors." - Richard Hays, p. 395*
- The Historical viewpoint would argue that men and women were created for one another, "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife,

and they become one flesh” (Genesis. 2:24). Thus the complementarity of male and female is given a theological grounding in God’s creative activity. This is partly why the New Testament texts in Romans and I Corinthians advocate against same gender sex: it does not fit with the new creation in Christ.

- The Historical viewpoint would argue that, although the church in times of historical discernment has reinterpreted the Bible – about slavery, about the ordination of women - it has been able to do so under the Bible interpretation principle of scripture interpreting scripture. It has been able to point to conflicting passages of scripture on the issues at hand. That is, Paul may advocate that “women remain silent” in some letters, but Peter reaches back to Joel on Pentecost to declare that “your sons and your *daughters* shall prophecy” that is, “preach” (Acts 2: 17). Paul does not condemn the awful practice of human slavery. However, in Philemon he urges a slave owner to treat his slave, Onesimus, as a free man in Christ. Furthermore, the arch of the Biblical narrative is based on freedom from oppression. No such disagreement among texts exists in the Bible with regards to same gender sexual relationships.
- The Historical viewpoint would argue that although being homosexual does not keep one from being a Christian, the only faithful expression of sexuality for the homosexual person is celibacy. Any physical same gender sexual expression is outside those boundaries and is considered sin.
- The historical viewpoint would argue that sexuality is not the basis for defining a person’s identity or for finding meaning and fulfillment in life. Our identity is found instead as children of God.

An Emerging Viewpoint

Proponents of gay and lesbian covenanted partnerships would ask the question:
Does the Bible really talk about this at all? Why would they say that?

- Because while it is true that the Biblical norm is heterosexual relationships, an Emerging viewpoint would argue that what we are talking about today is a completely new concept – a committed, monogamous, same gendered relationship between two people who are naturally (some would say created to be) attracted to one another. An Emerging viewpoint would say this is a brand new idea that biblical writers had no conception of, and thus we need to look at the Bible with fresh eyes.
- An Emerging viewpoint would argue that while the Bible is universally negative regarding homosexuality, it only talks about homosexuality as going against one’s natural state. So same gender sex is couched in the framework of going against

“who you were made to be.” It was always an act of rebellion while no one considered whether or not it was actually one’s natural state of being.

- An Emerging viewpoint would say Paul in Romans and I Corinthians is arguing against Roman and Greek same gender sexual practices which were often connected with idol worship or heterosexual adult males having sex with boys which was common in the Roman world.
 - *“A growing number of scholars, including evangelicals, argue that what the New Testament writers have in mind when they refer to homosexual practice could not have been the loving and stable same-sex unions of the sort that exist today, of which they knew nothing. Not only did the concepts of being either ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ not form the primary axis of Roman thinking about sexuality, no Latin words for these two ideas exist. (It is because of this that many scholars...prefer to use the terms ‘heterogenital’, ‘homogenital’ and ‘homoeroticism’ when referring to Greco-Roman sexual behavior.)” - Steven Chalke, p. 3.*
- An Emerging viewpoint would argue that these cultural practices were at the forefront of New Testament writers and that they were not thinking of a broader picture that would include an understanding of same-gendered orientation or what a committed, covenantal same gender relationship would look like: intimacy, care, love and mutual nurture and support.
- An Emerging viewpoint would admit that one can argue that the previous changes in church interpretation of the Bible concerning slavery and the ordination of women came out of the classical discernment principle of “scripture interpreting scripture,” and that there is no parallel scriptural counter to the universal condemnation of homosexual acts we find in scripture. However, an Emerging viewpoint would ask “does that settle the discussion?” What about Jesus’ ethic of inclusion?
- Continuing, an Emerging viewpoint might ask, “What if by holding closely to this law (condemning homosexual relationships) we actually make people break other laws of God and withhold God’s good gifts?” What if for some, to live into God’s desire that “man would not be alone” could only be lived out same-gendered? Wouldn’t going against this and marrying the opposite sex, for example, be a fraud? Does one have to choose between a life of being alone with no hope of any alternative and a life in a relationship that is less than its full intention?
- In other words, an Emerging viewpoint would say, “We know that the Bible universally condemns same gender relationship and we would be universally against homosexual practice that is simply lust driven, promiscuous, or an exercise of adults overpowering youth. However, a same gendered, monogamous, covenanted relationship between two people which is an expression of the meaning and intention of marriage is not really discussed in the Bible at all, except on the meta-narrative level of not being alone, of bearing

good fruit, and of living a holy life in service to Jesus Christ. That is the kind of Godly, Biblical relationships we are for.”

- An Emerging viewpoint would say that some homosexual Christians may be called to be celibate, as a gift from God. Yet, if they have not been given that gift, and Emerging viewpoint would say that homosexual Christians should be free to enter into monogamous, convent relationships that let them live out their life in a God – honoring relationship.

The Biblical Passages Concerning Homosexuality in Particular

Here are the six Bible passages that speak to same gender sexual acts.

- **Genesis 19:1-29** tells the story of Sodom and Gomorrah when the men wanted Lot to release his male guests so that they could gang rape them. As Richard Hays remarks in his chapter, it is not particularly relevant to our discussion since it is fundamentally about sexual violence.
- **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13** part of the “holiness code” for Israel, lists homosexual behavior as one of the prohibited acts. The challenge for some is that the holiness code also lists things that have since been understood to be prohibited in their particular time and place: codes about diet, circumcision, menstruation, etc. Thus some have questioned whether these verses remain normative for today. (Hays and Ron Belgau in our video do argue that Paul’s teaching in the New Testament has linguistic connections with Leviticus 18:22.)
- **I Corinthians 6:9-11 and I Timothy 1:10.** In these New Testament holiness code passages, not unlike other codes of their day, same gender sexual acts are prohibited.
- **Romans 1:18-32.** This is probably the most important Bible text for our discussion. Participants in the Roundtable will want to spend some time in the entire context of Romans chapters 1 – 3. Our video will spend some time here; half of Hays’ article is in dialogue with this passage, and Steven Chalke gives it a lot of attention in his article.

Places of agreement regarding this passage on both sides of the gay Christian discussion:

- Context: Paul is primarily interested in showing that all of humanity has fallen and not trying to condemn homosexuality per se.
- The church historically has misinterpreted this text to say that the great sin of the passage is homosexuality and because of this all the other sins follow. Both sides today clearly see that the sin Paul points to is *idolatry*. And from this particular sin of chasing after other gods of our own making

comes all the brokenness: same gender sexual acts, gossip, hate, obedience to parents, etc.

- The wrath of God in the passage is *not* because of homosexuality. Neither is God's wrath *coming* because of homosexuality (contra the fundamentalists after hurricanes Katrina, Sandy and the one next month). God's wrath is already manifest, it is God's letting the people go into the sin of idolatry with all its manifestations.
- The text is clearly negative on same gender sexual acts.

Places of Disagreement about Romans 1:

- Is Paul condemning all homosexual acts or those he is aware of in his historical context – those that are promiscuous, those involving abuse of power, and those having to do with idol worship?
- What does Paul mean when talking about people committing acts against their nature? Does he know about homosexual orientation? If he did, would that make a difference or not?
- Is Paul in Romans 1 talking about the sin of all *humanity* (Richard Hays) or in particular the sin of *Gentiles* (Justin Lee in our video)?