



A Biblical View of Same-Sex Partnership

SERIES: *Same-Sex Partnership?*

Those of you who are on our mailing list received a postcard in the mail this week letting you know that today and two weeks from today I plan on addressing the issue of same-sex partnerships. As the postcard explained, my desire was to encourage you to pray as we tackle a very sensitive and difficult issue. I also wanted to let you parents know that this subject matter probably isn't appropriate for kids not yet in high school. Some of you may even wonder, why bring this up in church?

But this is an issue that's long overdue for us to deal with. We're called to be both salt and light in our society. It's very important that we think clearly on this issue. And with the events in Massachusetts and a few weeks ago, and even some of the things taking place in the past couple of days in San Francisco, it's time to address it.

I plan on doing this in two parts. This week I want to deal with what the Scripture says about homosexuality, as well as address some of the most common arguments that even some Christians use in defending same sex partnerships. In two weeks I plan to talk about the more practical questions of how we should respond. Before I go on, I would like to acknowledge that I have relied heavily on John's Stott's excellent booklet entitled, "Same-Sex Partnerships: A Christian Perspective" (Revell, 1998).

I. THE CONTEXT

A. Four assumptions: Because of the explosive nature of this subject, I want to begin by stating a few assumptions. There are a number of truths about us that I take for granted as I speak.

1. First, *we're all human beings*. Whatever else we call ourselves, homosexual or heterosexual, we're first and foremost human. In one sense, there is no such thing as a "homosexual." There are, of course, homosexual acts. But I want to distinguish between the acts and the man or woman who does them. Men and women are first and foremost human beings made in the image of God. Although we may disagree with homosexual practices, we cannot dehumanize those who practice them.

2. Second, *we're all sexual beings*. Our sexuality is basic to our humanness. Angels may be sexless; we're not. When God made humankind, he made us male and female. When we talk about our sexuality, we are talking about something basic to our personhood, which strikes at the center of our identity. With this affirmation we would have to agree that we all have a particular sexual inclination. For a moment, we don't have to answer the question of HOW we get that way. But we all have an inclination because we're all sexual beings.

3. Third, *we're all sinners*. We're frail and vulnerable. None of us are without sin, and we are all continually battling our

own sinful nature. None of us have conquered it all. Every part of our humanity has been tainted by sin. In particular, we're all *sexual sinners*. Dr. Merville Vincent of Harvard Medical School is right when he says, "In God's view, I suspect we are all sexual deviants. I doubt if there is anyone who has not had a lustful thought that deviated from God's perfect ideal of sexuality." Nobody except Jesus has been sexually sinless. We all stand under the judgment of God in this area, in desperate need of his grace. None of us can come to this study with a "holier-than-thou" attitude.

4. Finally, *we're all under the authority of God and his word*. What I have to say will be most relevant to those who want to understand and obey what God says about this subject in the Scripture. If we don't share that common ground, it will be much more difficult for you to accept what I say. I'm proceeding on the assumption that what Scripture says about this is more important than what psychologists, legislators, or even ministers might say about this.

B. Three distinctions: Now with those assumptions, let me just make three important distinctions.

1. First, we must distinguish between *sins and crimes*. I think we would all agree that something may be legal, yet still sinful. Sex outside the context of marriage is a sin as defined in Scripture, though it's no longer a crime. Homosexuality is no longer a crime, and whether it should or shouldn't be is a matter of debate, but as we will see, it is a sin. The day may come when same-sex partnerships are legally sanctioned by marriage, but this doesn't automatically make them right.

2. Second, we must distinguish between homosexual *inclination and behavior*. A person might have a homosexual inclination ever since he or she can remember. Some say they were born that way. Others say it has more to do with the dynamics of the family you grew up in. But there is a difference between having the inclination and acting upon it. Just as a person might have a predisposition towards anger or alcoholism, acting out on it is another matter. We shouldn't blame people for their inclination, but we're all responsible for our behavior.

3. Third, we must distinguish between homosexual *practices and partnerships*. Some who are in a committed homosexual relationship say that this is very different from casual, anonymous, gratuitous sex that often takes place in the gay community. For a moment, I'd like to grant that distinction, but we still have to ask the question: what does God's word have to say about this? We might know what he says about irresponsible sex, but what about the other?

There are four primary biblical passages which deal with homosexual behavior. All of them refer to it negatively.

II. THE BIBLICAL PROHIBITIONS

A. The story of Sodom: The first is the story of Sodom found in Genesis. The writer of Genesis says that **“the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord”** (13:13). God says the **“outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin exceedingly grave,”** so he determines to investigate it (18:20-21). In the end, God overthrew those cities and all the people in them by an act of judgment (19:25). The question is, what was their sin?

Remember that two angels came to visit the city of Sodom, and Lot welcomed them into his home. But then the men of Sodom surrounded the house and said, **“Where are the two men who came to you tonight? Bring them out so that we may have relations with them”** (19:5). That word “have relations” is literally “know” and it has different meanings in Hebrew, not all of which are sexual. Sometimes it can just mean “to get acquainted with.” Because of that, same-sex advocates say that the sin of Sodom had nothing to do with homosexuality, but rather it was all about being angry at Lot for showing hospitality to strangers and putting their city in danger. They just wanted to get acquainted with them before they let them stay in their city. So the sin of Sodom, they say, was not homosexuality but rather being inhospitable. But that doesn't fit with the rest of the story. Later, Lot responds by saying he has two daughters who've not “known a man,” and he offers them to the men of Sodom instead of the angels. This was an evil thing to do; he's not sending his daughters out there to have tea! It's obvious what he's talking about. He's saying that they have never had sex with a man. The New Testament confirms this. Jude says that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah **“indulged in gross immorality and perversion”** (v. 7). You can see why the traditional Christian view has always been that they were guilty of homosexual practices.

B. The Leviticus texts: The second texts are found in the book of Leviticus. They're part of what we call the “holiness code.” God's people are challenged to follow his holy laws and not copy the practices of other nations. These practices included things like child sacrifice, idolatry, injustice, and sexual perversions. Two verses deal with the practice of homosexuality: **“You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination”** (Lev. 18:22). **“If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them”** (20:13). It's interesting that those who call themselves homosexual Christians claim that these passages are dealing with only the religious prostitution that took place among the Canaanite fertility cults. They say that since those religious practices have long since ceased, they have no relevance to same-sex partnerships today. But, as John Stott says, “The burden of proof is with them...The plain, natural interpretation of these two verses is that they prohibit homosexual intercourse of every kind.”

C. Paul's portrayal of decadent pagan society: This is consistent with what we see in the New Testament. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 1:26-27, **“For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and**

burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.” Paul is describing idolatrous pagans in the Greco-Roman world of his day. He says they had a knowledge of God through God's creation and their own conscience, but they suppressed the truth and practiced unrighteousness. In judgment, God gave them over to depraved minds and decadent practices, including “unnatural” sex.

This appears to be a very straightforward condemnation of same-sex relationships. But some argue that Paul knew nothing of those who have “natural” same-sex inclinations, or those who form committed same-sex partnerships; he was just talking about irresponsible perverts. The fact that they abandoned the “natural” for the “unnatural” even indicates that although they were heterosexually inclined, they abandoned that for homosexual practices. Surely if Paul were more enlightened on this subject, he would want those who are inclined to homosexuality to act on their “natural” impulses. I'm going to deal with that argument later, but for now I want you to see two other New Testament texts.

D. Paul's lists of sinners: In both 1 Cor. 6:9-10 and 1 Tim. 1:8-11 there are two lists of sins, both of which include homosexuality. The first list uses two different words to describe two different things. Without being too graphic, the first literally meant “soft to the touch” and was used to describe males who played the passive role in homosexual sex. The second word literally means “male in a bed” and described the one who took the active role. Same-sex advocates today say this referred exclusively to the ancient practice of selling younger boys to older men. But most biblical scholars would agree with Peter Coleman when he says, “Taken together, St. Paul's writings repudiate homosexual behavior as a vice of the Gentiles in Romans, as a bar to the Kingdom in Corinthians, and as an offense to be repudiated by the moral law in 1 Timothy.”

So there are four main texts that repudiate homosexual behavior. You might think that in a book as big as the Bible, there would be more. Last week I criticized a popular Christian book for proof-texting - taking verses out of their original context to prove a point. Am I not doing the same thing here by using a few isolated texts to prove my point? Some would add that none of these passages really repudiate a loving, lifelong commitment between two people who've always felt inclined towards same-sex relationships. So for just a few minutes, it might be helpful to move beyond these negative texts and look at the positive teaching of Genesis about human sexuality and marriage. When we go back to the creation of humanity, God's original blueprint, what do we see?

III. SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE IN THE BIBLE

A. Fundamental truths about marriage: Genesis 1 and 2 provide two complimentary accounts of creation. The first chapter is general and affirms the equality of the sexes, since both are made in the image of God. Genesis 2 is more specific, affirming the complimentary differences between the sexes, which is the basis for heterosexual marriage. In the second chapter of Genesis, three fundamental truths emerge.

1. First, *the human need for companionship.* In v.18, after creating Adam, God says, **“It's not good that man should be alone.”** God has created us as social beings, with the capacity to love and be loved. That's part of being made in his image. So God

continues and says, **“I will make him a helper suitable for him.”** As we’ll see, this “helper” who is different but “suitable for him” is also to become his sexual partner and they are to become “one flesh.”

2. Second, Genesis 2 reveals *the divine provision to meet this human need*. Having affirmed Adam’s need for a partner, the search begins. God parades before Adam the animals and Adam proceeds to name them. Yet verse 20 says, **“But for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.”** Since there was no one suitable for Adam, God had to perform a special act of creation. Adam was placed into a deep sleep and out of his rib God fashioned a woman. This was divine surgery under divine anesthetic! As Matthew Henry wrote, **“Not made out of his head to top him, not made out of his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”** Once the woman was created, Adam awoke from his deep sleep and God presented the woman to him, like a bride’s father gives his daughter away. Adam was overwhelmed. He broke into the first love song ever written: **“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man”** (2:23). To put it bluntly, Adam was turned on! And he didn’t need any help, if you know what I mean.

3. This leads to the third thing Genesis 2 reveals, and that is *the resulting institution of marriage*. After the love song in verse 23 comes the phrase **“For this reason…”** in verse 24. **“For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”** Notice the constituents parts of a marriage are one man and one woman. Notice that their union is to be publicly acknowledged as they leave their father and mother; it’s to be permanently sealed as they “cleave” to one another in a loving commitment. And it’s to be physically consummated in a “one flesh” union.

4. By the way, *Jesus endorsed this definition of marriage in the New Testament*. When he was questioned about marriage, he quoted Gen. 1:27 which said that God **“created them male and female.”** And then he quoted Gen. 2:24, which affirmed the leaving and cleaving and resulting one-flesh union we just talked about. Finally, he added his own comment, **“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no man separate”** (Matthew 19:4-6). So, in short, Jesus affirmed that heterosexual gender is a divine creation, heterosexual marriage is a divine institution, and heterosexual fidelity is the divine intention. Scripture endorses no other kind of marriage or sex. By the way, we should not single out homosexual relationships for special condemnation. The fact is that every kind of sexual relationship and activity which deviates from this is wrong in his eyes. This includes adultery, cohabitation, casual encounters, pornography and teenage experimentation.

Now, of course, homosexual advocates disagree with this teaching for a variety of reasons. And I believe, to be fair, we have to address those reasons. In the time remaining, let me deal with five of these.

IV. CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS CONSIDERED

A. Argument about Scripture and culture: The first reason we’ve already touched upon - it’s the argument about Scripture and culture. The idea here is that the biblical authors lived in a very different culture than ours and were addressing questions relevant to their culture and not to ours. Not only that, Paul knew

little about our culture. He didn’t know about modern psychology or the concept of a person having an innate homosexual inclination.

Let me respond. If the only teaching we had were the negative prohibitions, it might be difficult to answer this argument. But the positive teaching in Genesis about the creation of man and woman and the divine institution of marriage is designed to be universally applicable. The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 take place before culture even developed. The reason for the prohibitions is that the practice of homosexuality is against the created order. Gays accuse evangelicals of being overly literal in using the Bible, but here we’ve looked beneath the surface of the commands to the clear teaching on biblical sexuality and marriage from Genesis, which was endorsed by Christ himself.

B. Argument about creation and nature: The second argument that is used deals with creation and nature. People say, “I’m gay because God made me that way. Like a fish was made to swim, so I was made for same-sex relationships. How could God make me a certain way and then deny me the right to express it? That would be unnatural!”

Let me respond. First, we should be very compassionate with those who’ve felt a same-sex inclination for as long as they can remember. Whether we’re willing to concede that they were born that way or not, often times that’s all they know. That’s a tremendous burden to live with and we who have never been through that should not act like it’s all their fault, because oftentimes it’s not.

Also, we should be careful with oversimplified explanations for why a person feels these things. Science hasn’t come up with a definitive explanation for what causes a homosexual inclination. It may be a combination of things, including childhood family dynamics, or confusing sexual experiences, including abuse, that bring both pleasure and shame. Unfortunately, our own stereotypes are part of the problem. There are boys who are drawn to things our culture labels as “feminine” and there are girls who are interested in things our culture labels as “masculine.” That doesn’t make them gay, but when our cultural stereotypes make them feel that way, you can understand their confusion.

I would also say that just because we feel certain inclinations doesn’t mean we have the right to fulfill them. And sometimes when we do fulfill them, that just makes the inclination stronger. Because I may have a propensity towards losing my temper, does that make it okay to do so? Even Jesus experienced sexual desire, but he never fulfilled it. He called all of us to take up our cross and follow him.

Finally, we should let our creator God define what is natural and unnatural. What is “natural” is what conforms to the biblical doctrine of creation, not what conforms to our own feelings. Something might feel natural to us, but according to God’s creative order, it is in fact unnatural.

C. Argument about quality of relationships: The third argument concerns the quality of relationships. The idea here is that love is the greatest commandment, and this is the criterion that should be used to judge a relationship. If a

same-sex relationship is characterized by love, commitment, and tenderness, and self-sacrifice, how can that be wrong?

One of the problems with this argument is that this is a rare thing in the homosexual community, especially among men. The truth is that gay relationships are characterized more by promiscuity than by fidelity. It's also difficult to maintain that same-sex partnerships are an expression of love in light of the danger and damage that often results. Besides AIDS, there is a greatly increased danger of infectious hepatitis, viral infections, and liver and rectal cancer. But most of all, the biblical Christian cannot accept the premise that loving another person is the only absolute moral law. Jesus told us that the first and greatest commandment is to love THE LORD with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. And Jesus also said, "**If you love me, you will keep my commandments**" (John 14:15). So a loving relationship is not in itself enough criterion to authenticate it. If it were, then adultery is okay as long as you love the person. I've heard many married men and women tell me that their adultery is okay because they have fallen in love. But does that make it okay? The quality of love is not the only yardstick to measure what is good or right.

D. Argument about justice and rights: The fourth argument deals with the issue of justice and human rights. The idea here is that discrimination is wrong, whether it be on account of race, gender, social class, or even sexual preference. God is a God of justice. Just as slaves and women have been afforded equal rights, so should homosexuals. I'm going to deal with this more next week, but for now I would agree that oppression and discrimination is wrong, towards homosexuals or anyone else. Scripture says to "Honor all men." But discrimination and injustice is different than a society's refusal to recognize same-sex marriage, or an individual's refusal to accept the same as morally right. We can and should be tolerant of different lifestyles but still disagree with them.

E. Argument about acceptance and the Gospel:

Finally, there is the argument about acceptance and the Gospel. Doesn't the grace of God mean that he accepts us just as we are? Why not accept homosexuals just as they are? Well, God does accept us as we are, and we don't have to make ourselves good to earn his acceptance. But his acceptance means he freely forgives those who repent of their sin and believe the gospel, not that he condones our continuing in sin. And we accept each other as fellow sinners endeavoring to follow Christ, not as fellow sinners resolved to persist in our sinning. Jesus accepted the woman caught in adultery, but he also commanded her to "Go and sin no more."

Conclusion

The pressure today on the church to change its historic stance on homosexuality is unrelenting. But I hope we've seen today that we can change our position only by changing our fundamental stance on biblical authority and changing our core view of human beings made in the image of God.

In every generation, the church has been faced with new challenges to cave in to the culture and abandon God's truth. The current challenge of same-sex partnerships is the newest form of an old set of challenges--to diminish the authority of God's word, and to understand people on their own terms rather than by God's view of them.

Jesus was our perfect model of love and compassion, but he didn't just accept all lifestyles; he had the gall to tell others how to live their lives, to insist that he alone was the way, the truth and the life. John says he was "**full of grace and truth.**" In dealing with this issue, we must not abandon either grace or truth. This week I have discussed the latter; next week I will emphasize the former.