

Gender and Sexuality: Biblical Visions, Contemporary Questions

Fall 2019 Adult Sunday School – Trinity Baptist Church

In the last few decades the prevailing consensus in our society has shifted away from traditional Christian understandings about gender, sexuality, and marriage. This is an opportunity for Christians to carefully examine biblical teachings, not simply holding to inherited traditions nor simply conforming to current culture. Rather, we will consider these matters in light of the overarching biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and glory. We will consider how to relate to one another in the church as well as to our friends, co-workers, and neighbors.

Previous handouts and audio files are available on the church website.

Oct 6: Beautiful and Broken: Why Bodies, Gender, and Sexuality are Good Gifts from God; And, Why nothing's quite the way it's supposed to be anymore – Genesis 1-3

Oct 13: The Shape of Redemption, Part 1: From a Barren Wilderness to a Fruitful Garden: God's Design for Earthly Marriage and Sex to anticipate the Marriage Supper of the Lamb – Genesis 2, Revelation 21

Oct 20: The Shape of Redemption, Part 2: Undivided Devotion to the Lord: The Crucial Witness of Christian Singleness to Christ's Sufficiency – Isaiah 56:5-7, Matthew 19:10-12, 1 Corinthians 7

Oct 27: But What About...Part 1: Homosexuality: What does the Bible actually say? What does redemption look like if I'm a same-sex-attracted Christian?

Nov 3: But What About...Part 2: Trapped in the Wrong Body? Intersexuality, Transgender Identity, Gender Fluidity, etc.

Nov 10: But What About...Part 3: Relating with wisdom and love to LGBT folks outside the church. Interacting fruitfully with changing cultural assumptions, worldviews, and political movements. Healthy ways of addressing gender and sexuality with children and youth in Christian families.

Nov 17: Break from this class (Visiting Missionary Presentation – Dr. Adams Shaba from Nigeria)

Nov 24: But What About...Part 4: Pornography and Its Effects

Dec 1: But What About...Part 5: Lament and Hope: The Bible and Sexual Abuse/Assault

Dec 8: The Hope of Glory: Washed and Waiting

--

But What About...Part 1: Homosexuality: What does the Bible actually say? What does redemption look like if I'm a same-sex-attracted Christian?

October 27, 2019

We began this class by considering how our human bodies, gender, and sexuality are both *beautiful* and *broken*: they are good gifts from our creator God to be received with wonder and praise, but they are also damaged and distorted by sin and its effects.

We then considered the importance of our bodies in Christ's redemptive mission. Because Christ accomplished our salvation in his body, our salvation involves the redemption of our bodies, including our gender and sexuality. What does that redemption look like?

First, we considered the path of *Christ-centered marriage*. For believers in Jesus, marriage is not primarily a means to preserve social cohesion (the prevailing emphasis of traditional cultures) or to promote individual happiness (the prevailing emphasis of modern cultures). Rather, at the deepest level, Christian marriage is given to us as a covenant sign, a sacred picture of the faithful, fruitful, exclusive, enduring, filled-with-love-and-wonder union between God and his people. Marriage is intended to point us to the kind of relationship that God is drawing us into for all eternity.

Second, we considered the path of *consecrated Christian singleness*, living for a season or for a lifetime without marriage, sex, or biological children. The New Testament, unlike other monotheistic faiths, has a positive vision of celibate singleness consecrated to God. This way of life visibly portrays both the cost of discipleship in this present age, as well as the sufficiency of Christ for our identity, delight, legacy, and companionship. It is an opportunity for undivided devotion to and fruitful service in God's kingdom, supported by the family of the church. It has been embodied by Jesus himself, the apostle Paul, and many missionaries, scholars, caregivers, and prayer warriors throughout the history of the church.

Having laid this foundation, we will now begin addressing a series of challenging issues that are increasingly prevalent in today's world, and also causes of concern or confusion within today's church. Namely, we will consider homosexuality, transgender identity, pornography, and sexual abuse. (These are not the only current issues related to the body, gender, and sexuality; other issues include: adultery and betrayal, divorce and remarriage, the nature of masculinity and femininity, roles of men and women in the home and church and world, contraception and abortion, IVF and assisted reproduction. We have addressed many of these issues in other classes and sermons, but we will not focus on them here.)

Today we will focus on homosexuality, and specifically on what the Bible says to Christians and how we should live within the Christian church. (Next week we'll focus on how we as Christians should relate to people who are outside the church.) The two questions we will address are: (1) What does the Bible actually say about homosexuality? and (2) What does redemption look like if I'm a same sex attracted Christian?

1. What does the Bible actually say about homosexuality?

For nearly 2000 years, the near-unanimous view of the Christian church has been that God designed sex for male-female marriage only, and therefore, sexual activity between two men or two women is not in accordance with God's plan for his redeemed people, and is a particular example of the sin that afflicts all fallen humanity. This is often referred to as the *traditional view*.

However, some Christians, initially within mainline Protestant denominations but more recently within evangelical Protestant circles, have argued that the traditional view of the church is wrong. God is not against gay sex, but rather, God approves of committed, monogamous, consensual, loving same-sex relationships, and therefore the church should adopt an *affirming* view of same-sex unions. Many mainline denominations (e.g. United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA) have officially adopted such a policy. More recently, professing evangelicals are advocating this view as well (e.g. Matthew Vines' Reformation Project, Justin Lee's Q Christian Fellowship, Tony Campolo, David Gushee, etc.).

Other Christians have not gone quite so far, but argue that the question is at least unclear enough that we should allow for people within the church to hold different views and to advocate and practice their

differing convictions, without being corrected or disciplined for doing so. Christians have found ways to “agree to disagree” on matters such as infant vs. believers baptism, interpretations of the millennium, the structure of church government, etc. Can’t we, in love, “agree to disagree” and recognize this as a “disputable matter” (Romans 14:1)? This approach is sometimes referred to as a *third way* (although the term *third way* is used by a variety of people and often means different things; sometimes it just means a commitment to hold together both grace and truth).

Before we dive into explaining specific biblical passages and evaluating these views, I think it’s important to say that most people do not change their views on this issue primarily because of an extensive study of the Bible, or because of complicated scholarly arguments. For most people today, this question has significant personal, emotional, and relational dimensions. What about my gay brother, sister, uncle, aunt, son, daughter, friend, colleague, neighbor? Is the traditional view inherently harmful to LGBT people, many of whom have lived under a cloud of fear and shame? Or, why hasn’t God taken away my own same sex attractions when I’ve cried out to him countless times to do so? Can a life of celibacy actually lead to flourishing rather than further isolation? The Bible may be clear, but is it good? It may be true, but is it beautiful? These very real personal questions, emotional struggles, and relational implications often drive us and shape our views as much as anything else. (And so, if you hold the traditional view, and if you are talking with a fellow Christian who has doubts about the traditional view, it’s important to not just start by quoting Bible verses that supposedly settle the issue, but to seek to understand what’s at stake for them, what are their specific concerns, and then to look at how Christ and the Scriptures speak to those concerns.) I think it’s also important to lay the foundation that we’ve laid over the past three weeks, that we are both beautiful and broken, and that Christ has come to redeem us including our bodies, that the church needs both married and single people to faithfully bear witness to Christ, etc.

Having said that, I do want to examine specific biblical texts, because (1) as a church we are committed to teaching and following what the Bible says, and not only being driven by our personal and emotional and relational contexts, and (2) because ultimately, God gave us the Bible for our good.

There are six Bible passages that address homosexuality in particular.

- Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorrah (a similar story appears in Judges 19)
 - This is an account of homosexual gang rape, not consensual sex
 - Later Bible passages (Ezekiel 16:49-50; Luke 10:10-12; Jude 7) condemn Sodom for a wide variety of sins (pride, gluttony, neglecting to help the poor, hostility towards God’s messengers, as well as sexual immorality).
 - This example by itself is not decisive for the question of consensual, committed same-sex relationships
- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13
 - “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22). Leviticus 20:13 prescribes the death penalty for such acts (as well as for other violations of the marriage covenant including adultery, incest, and bestiality).
 - Everyone agrees that these verses prohibited gay sex in ancient Israel. The question is: *Do these laws still apply to Christians today?*
 - In general, the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were fulfilled in Christ, and so they are no longer binding on Christians. But God’s moral laws reflect his unchanging character, and so Christians must continue to obey them.
 - Most of Leviticus 18 seems to fall into the category of moral law (though not all – Leviticus 18:19 prohibits sexual relations during a woman’s monthly period, and most Christians don’t see that as an unchanging moral law of God).
 - The clearest way to know whether this command still applies is to ask: *Does the New Testament specifically reaffirm this command?*
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (a similar list appears in 1 Timothy 1:9-10)

- “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*], nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”
- Some scholars have argued that Paul was referring specifically to homosexual prostitution or exploitation. But, there is a pair of Greek words that refer specifically to sexual relations between an older man and a younger boy, and Paul did not use those words.
- The ESV text note rightly says, “the two Greek words translated by this phrase refer [respectively] to the passive and active partners in consensual homosexual acts.”
- In particular, the second word Paul uses is *arsenokoitai*. It’s a compound word from *arsen* (male) and *koitai* (intercourse), which echoes the Greek translation of Leviticus 20:13, which says “*whoever* lies with a male as with a woman, they have both done” what is not pleasing to God.
- So Paul specifically reaffirms the Leviticus prohibition, in the context of reaffirming God’s moral law as reflected in the Ten Commandments (both lists, in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, follow the pattern of the Ten Commandments more broadly).
- Romans 1:18-32 (see especially vv. 26-27)
 - Context: Paul is describing a variety of attitudes and behaviors typical of the Gentile world in his day. Paul says that these particular sins are the result of humanity’s ongoing alienation from, and rebellion against God.
 - Pattern: human beings *exchange* God’s good gifts for corrupt alternatives, and God *gives them up* to their own sinful desires
 - They “*exchanged* the glory of the immortal God for images” (v 23), so “God *gave them up* in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (v 24)
 - They “*exchanged* the truth about God for a lie” (v 25), so God “*gave them up* to dishonorable passions” (v 26)
 - Their women “*exchanged* natural relations for those contrary to nature, and the men *gave up* natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (v 26-27), so “God *gave them up* to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (v 28)
 - “When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator’s design” (Richard Hays)
 - “Homosexuality, like all [particular] sins, is symptomatic and not causal – that is, it tells us where our heart has been, not who we inherently are or what we are destined to become...Committing my life to Christ meant not going back to my heterosexual past but going forward to something entirely new” (Rosaria Butterfield)
 - Paul does not say: the problem in your life is that you’re gay and you need to become straight. He says, the main problem in your life is that you are alienated from God, homosexuality is just one symptom of our fallen human condition, and you need to be reconciled with God through Christ.

“But Jesus didn’t say anything about homosexuality. Maybe this was just Paul’s hang-up.”

- Within Jesus’ Jewish cultural context, there was no debate about homosexual practice; everyone agreed that it was contrary to God’s will and characteristic of the Gentile/pagan world. When Jesus disagreed with the Pharisees, he did not tend to hide his disagreement by remaining silent.
- Further, Jesus explicitly affirmed male-female marriage: “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning ‘made them male and female’, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh?’” (Matthew 19:4-5) Jesus reasons as follows: because God made *two* complementary sexes (male and female), marriage is intended to be monogamous (not polygamous) and unbroken (not a cycle of divorce and remarriage). By the same reasoning, marriage must also be heterosexual. The only other option that Jesus commended to his disciples was celibacy for God’s kingdom (Matthew 19:10-12).

“Couldn’t this be a “disputable matter” (Romans 14:1) where Christians can simply agree to disagree?”

- In Romans 14 Paul mentions the eating of clean/unclean foods, the observance of special days, and drinking wine, as “disputable matters” where Christians can love and respect each other’s different ways of living out biblical principles.
- But Paul warns strongly against sexual immorality (as well as greed, pride, rage, lying, bitterness, and idolatry) and does not consider these to be “disputable matters” (1 Cor 5-6; Rom 13:11-14).
- Further, drawing boundaries is not inherently unloving. All churches, even the most progressive ones, want to resist certain kinds of behavior (sexual and otherwise) as incompatible with faithfulness to Jesus and ultimately harmful to our souls and to our communities.
 - The real challenge is how to communicate boundaries in a way that reflects God’s wisdom and love (with patience, courage, clarity, humility, listening, bearing one another’s burdens, persevering in love, etc.)
- Refusing to draw any clear boundaries and allowing everyone to follow their own conscience only makes sense if one believes that scripture is unclear about, or approving of, gay sex, or that the issue is simply unimportant. This is an unstable view that will not tend to last long.

In conclusion, there is no biblical warrant to depart from the traditional Christian view.

However, it is not enough to affirm that Scripture is clear in its affirmation of male-female marriage and in its rejection of all sexual intimacy outside of that context. It is also essential to consider what a redemptive path and a flourishing life looks like for Christians who do experience same sex attraction.

2. What does redemption look like if I’m a same sex attracted Christian?

Let us begin by considering the broader context of the two New Testament passages which address homosexuality in particular: 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 and Romans 1-8.

“Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ***And such were some of you. 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 Corinthians 6:9-11).

- Our sexual attractions and even our past sexual sins do not define us at the deepest level. Every person who belongs to Christ has been given a new identity. We are washed: cleansed of guilt and shame. We are sanctified: set apart for God’s holy purposes. We are justified: declared righteous in God’s sight because of Christ’s atoning work. Our bodies are now temples in which God’s Holy Spirit dwells. These promises are for all who turn to Christ, including people who have previously been characterized by every kind of sinful pattern mentioned in v 9-10.

We can see a similar pattern in the book of Romans:

- Romans 1:18-3:9 emphasizes the solidarity of all humanity in sin. There is no excuse for self-righteousness, just as there is no excuse for sexual immorality and all other kinds of sins.
- “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8)
- “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might walk in newness of life” (6:4)
- Romans 7 speaks realistically about our ongoing struggle with sin
- Romans 8 says that there is *no condemnation* for all who are in Christ Jesus and points us toward the future hope of “the redemption of our bodies” (8:23).

If God says No to gay sex, what then are followers of Christ who experience same sex attraction called to? In the early 1950s Sheldon Vanauken, a college professor who had recently come to faith in Christ through his interactions with C.S. Lewis, wrote to Lewis asking for guidance on this very question, because college students were sharing their struggles and asking him and his wife for advice. Lewis replied as follows:

“First, I take it for certain that the physical satisfaction of homosexual desires is sin. This leaves the homosexual no worse off than any normal person who is, for whatever reason, prevented from marrying. Second, our speculations on the cause of the abnormality are not what matters and we must be content with ignorance. The disciples were not told why (in terms of efficient cause) the man was born blind (John 9:1-3): only the final cause, that the works of God should be made manifest in him. This suggests that in homosexuality, as in every other tribulation, those works can be made manifest: i.e. that every disability conceals a vocation, if only we can find it, which will ‘turn the necessity to glorious gain.’ What should the positive life of the homosexual be? I wish I had a letter which a pious male homosexual, now dead, once wrote to me...He believed that his necessity could be turned to spiritual gain: that there were certain kinds of sympathy and understanding, a certain social role which mere men and mere women could not give....Perhaps any homosexual who humbly accepts his cross and puts himself under Divine guidance will...be shown the way....Like all other tribulations, it must be offered to God and His guidance how to use it must be sought.”¹

Notes from Lewis’ reply:

1. Lewis affirms that Scripture is clear in its teaching about sexual ethics.
2. He says that debates about causation are not important.
3. He affirms that “every disability conceals a vocation.”
4. We can’t completely define that vocation from the outset, or from the outside; it’s an ongoing process of seeking God and submitting to his guidance.

To what are Christians who experience same sex attraction called to?

1. **Celibacy** as an expression of devotion to Christ, for the present time
 - a. *Objection: Isn’t this an unfair burden to put on all persons who experience same sex attraction? Celibacy should be embraced voluntarily, not imposed unwillingly.*
 - i. Many Christians (especially women, because generally speaking, women outnumber men in the church) strongly desire to marry but cannot find a willing, believing partner. (Others have been divorced and are convinced they should not remarry.)
 - ii. Hardly anyone’s sexual desires are fully satisfied in the exclusive context of monogamous lifelong marriage.
 - iii. When Christ calls his disciples, he calls each of us to take up our cross and follow him. Most of our “crosses” and “burdens” are not chosen by ourselves. (E.g. physical disabilities, chronic pain, depression, childhood trauma and its effects, being born into a dysfunctional family, being the victim of racism or persecution, parenting a rebellious child, most illnesses, marriage to a difficult spouse, etc.) Same sex attraction has its particular challenges but it is far from unique in this respect! The challenge for all of us is to believe that God can redeem even our most unwanted burdens as we entrust ourselves and all our life unto Christ.
2. **Identity** in Christ, and not primarily in one’s sexual desires
 - a. Christians use a range of terms to describe themselves
 - i. Some refer to themselves as “celibate gay Christians” because the term “gay” is readily understandable by non-Christians, while the term “same sex attraction” is often perceived negatively in the larger LGBT community.

¹ Quoted at <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2013/08/25/c-s-lewis-to-sheldon-vanauken-on-homosexuality/>

- ii. Other Christians think that it is not wise to identify as “gay” because our true identity is found in Christ, and we should resist the idea that our sexual desires form part of our core identity and/or that they are always unchangeable. They may instead describe themselves as “a same sex attracted Christian.”
 - iii. A friend of mine who majored in Spanish put it this way several years ago: “Estoy pero no soy” [literally “I am, but I am not”]
 - 1. Estoy = what/how I’m currently experiencing life
 - 2. Soy = this is my essential/unchangeable self
 - iv. While it is important to think about how you describe yourself, we should resist the temptation to quarrel about words, be patient with people who are in process, and ask for clarification when necessary. Regardless, our primary identity needs to be in Christ above all.
- 3. **Attraction:** should we pray for, hope for, expect, someone’s sexual attractions to change, from gay to straight, through the power of Christ?
 - a. Biblical principles
 - i. Changing one’s sexual orientation/attractions is not the primary goal for Christians.
 - 1. “The goal is not heterosexuality but holiness.” Change is “the freedom to choose holiness, not the absence of struggle” (Christopher Yuan). We still await the redemption of our bodies, and God has not promised to take away all temptations in this life.
 - ii. At the same time, nothing is impossible with God, and eternal life in Christ begins now in the present, not only after we die.
 - b. Practical realities
 - i. Reparative therapy is a psychological technique with the goal of changing from a homosexual orientation to a heterosexual orientation. It is increasingly under attack by LGBT leaders, and it is now illegal in 18 US states to counsel minors in this way.
 - 1. Christians who affirm the traditional view should not necessarily defend or promote the practice of reparative therapy.
 - ii. If you are content to pursue a life of consecrated Christian singleness, there is no need or pressure to cultivate sexual desires for the opposite sex (which would only present a different kind of temptation). Focus instead on finding friendship and community in the church, actively serving the Lord with your gifts, and embracing a positive vocation of Christian singleness.
 - iii. If you want to get married to someone of the opposite sex, but feel that this is impossible because you’ve only ever felt same sex attraction, this could be a matter worth talking through and praying about along with close friends and wise Christian leaders. But often the process is at least as important as the outcome. God may be inviting you to deal with deep wounds (e.g. past trauma, sexual abuse, relationship with an absent/distant father, etc.) if those are part of your story, regardless of whether or not you end up in a heterosexual marriage. Resist the temptation to idolize marriage, even if you desire it.
 - iv. If you are constantly overwhelmed by lust and/or are regularly falling into addictive or habitual patterns of sin, seek help. Talk with a pastor, seek accountability, join a sex addiction recovery group, etc.
 - c. Christians who have pursued a change of attraction report a wide range of results
 - i. A small number of people have experienced a change in their overall sexual attractions from gay to straight. Generally, sexual attraction seems more fluid for women, and more hard-wired for men.
 - ii. A larger number of people have entered into a marriage with someone of the opposite sex and found it possible to be sexually attracted to that one person, while still experiencing frequent or occasional same-sex attractions.

- iii. Many people, though they pursued some or all of the above avenues, did not find their sexual attractions to have changed significantly.
- iv. Some have found relative contentment in celibate singleness, while others struggle with persistent loneliness.
- d. What if I really want to become straight but I'm not experiencing any change in my sexual attractions? Consider possible analogies: chronic depression? strong inclination toward alcoholism? incurable physical illness? ongoing persecution? other "unwelcome burdens" that can't be easily discarded?

"So much of my life as a homosexual Christian...has simply been learning how to *wait*, to be patient, to endure, to bear up under an unwelcome burden for the long haul. Taped onto my desk where I write is a small sheet of paper with a quote from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke: 'Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart.' Having patience with your own weaknesses is, I think, something of what Paul was commending when he described the tension of living on this side of wholeness. When God acts climactically to reclaim the world and raise our dead bodies from the grave, there will be no more homosexuality. But until then, we hope for what we do not see. Washed and waiting. That is my life – my identity as one who has been forgiven and spiritually cleansed and my struggle as one who perseveres with a frustrating thorn in the flesh, looking forward to what God has promised to do" (Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, p. 50).

Recommended Resources

There is a band of brothers and sisters who are walking this difficult road, who have experienced same-sex attraction but who have held on to the clear teaching of scripture, and who are fixing their eyes on the cross of Christ and on the joy set before us.

Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*. One of the first books explicitly discussing the author's unrelenting experience of same sex attraction, along with his commitment to celibacy in light of a traditional Christian vision of marriage. Hill identifies as a "celibate gay Christian."

Ed Shaw, *Same Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life*. Ed Shaw is a pastor in the UK. This is a very good but lesser known book which confronts common misconceptions and gives practical examples of seeking to flourish in a life of celibate singleness.

Jackie Hill-Perry, *Gay Girl Good God: The Story of Who I Was and Who God Has Always Been*. A beautiful memoir about God's persistent grace and transforming power by a poet and artist

Rachel Gilson's blog (rachelgilson.com) – Rachel came to faith in Christ as a Yale undergraduate while she was dating a woman. She later got baptized at Trinity where she was a member for about 10 years and married her husband Andrew. She is now on staff with Cru in the Boston area. She hasn't written a book yet, but her blog is a great resource.

Living Out (livingout.org) – a network of writers based in the UK who experience same-sex attraction yet are committed to the traditional biblical teaching about marriage

Other recommended authors: Rosaria Butterfield, Christopher Yuan, Sam Allberry, Becket Cook

For more on biblical interpretation, see Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Say About Homosexuality?* or Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Shorter articles include: Richard Hays' chapter on "Homosexuality" in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*; and Tim Keller, "The Bible and same sex relationships: A review article" available online)