
Same-Sex Marriage— Facing the Question

by Todd Wilken

Forcing the Question, Facing the Question

Should a man marry a man? Should a woman marry a woman? Should same-sex marriage be allowed? Should the word *marriage* be redefined to include same-sex couples?

Did you ever think society and the church would be asking such questions? And if you did, did you ever think these questions would come upon us so suddenly? Did you think these questions would so quickly dominate our political and theological attention?

Like it or not, these questions are being forced upon us. In the past, homosexual behavior was considered immoral, unnatural, and harmful. In the past, same-sex marriage would have received universal condemnation. However, the Christian is called to live and remain faithful in the present, not in the past.

Christians cannot ignore these questions. The advocates of same-sex marriage will not permit us to do so. Dr. David Adams of Concordia Seminary has said, "We are in the first shots of a culture war that will make the fight over abortion look like a trivial, little conflict . . . those who are in favor of same-sex marriage are both much more aggressive, much more hostile to traditional morality, and are much [more]

willing to go to any lengths to get their way.” Citing the Canadian use of hate-speech laws to silence opposition to homosexuality, Adams says, “That’s a level of conflict we’ve never reached in the abortion battle, nor would we ever be likely to do so. But it is the level of fight that we can expect to see here in America as well.”¹

Christians can face these questions because we have answers. But a simple “no” will not do. We must be able to explain our answers. It’s one thing to say, “Marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman. That’s the way it’s always been; that’s the way it should stay.” It’s another thing to understand and defend this answer.

Same-Sex Marriage— What Is at Stake?

Christians are rightly concerned about same-sex marriage. We recognize that the push for same-sex marriage threatens the foundation and structure of civilization. We have moral and social concerns:

- the growing acceptance of homosexuality
- the moral decline of society
- the abolition of the traditional family
- the welfare of children

We have legal concerns:

- an activist judiciary
- a growing disregard for the rule of law
- possible charges of discrimination if the church does not sanction same-sex marriage

We have philosophical concerns:

- the redefinition of words such as *marriage* and *family*
- the rise of false “tolerance”

While all of these concerns are valid, Christians would be wrong to think of same-sex marriage as merely a moral, social, legal, or philosophical issue. First, none of these concerns will disappear if same-sex marriage remains illegal. Second, the push for same-sex marriage threatens something more important than civilization. There is one concern regarding same-sex marriage that outweighs them all. It is a uniquely Christian concern.

Our greatest concern regarding same-sex marriage is the purity of the Gospel message as we receive it and share it. What does same-sex marriage have to do with Jesus’ perfect life, death, and resurrection for sinners? Three things.

Scripture uses the marriage of man and woman to show us the relationship of Christ to His church. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:25–32,

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy without blemish. In this same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and

cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of His body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Among other things, God gave marriage between a man and a woman as a life-long object lesson in the sacrificial love of Jesus for sinners. A redefinition of marriage would go against this image of the Gospel.

The Christian family plays a vital role in the proclamation of the Gospel. Martin Luther says of Christian parents:

First of all, they should earnestly and faithfully discharge their office, not only to support and provide for the bodily necessities of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but, most of all, to train them to the honor and praise of God. . . . But for this purpose He has given us children, and issued this command that we should train and govern them according to His will, else He would have no need of father and mother. Let every one know, therefore, that it is his duty, on peril of losing the divine favor, to bring up his children above all things in the fear and knowledge of God.²

If the definition of marriage changes, then the definition of parenthood also changes. A homosexual couple, who are in rebellion against the Creator and His Word, will hardly raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The advocates of same-sex marriage need to hear God's Word of Law and Gospel. They need, as we all do, to be brought to repentance by the Law, and to be forgiven by the Gospel. The legalization of same-sex marriage will give its advocates a sense of approval and false security in their sin.

Does the Bible say anything about same-sex marriage? There is no passage that reads, "A man shall not marry a man; a woman shall not marry a woman." However, the Bible does present marriage as relationship between a man and a woman exclusively (Matthew 19:4-5). Also, the Bible clearly forbids homosexual behavior (Romans 1:26-32).

What Does the Bible Say about Marriage?

Scripture defines marriage as a man and a woman lawfully living in love and faithfulness for life. Our Lord Jesus looked to the Creation when He said:

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 his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh*"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matthew 19:4-6, emphasis added)

From Jesus we learn to find the definition of marriage in God's creation of man and woman. God's creation of man and woman demonstrates several

things relevant to the issue of same-sex marriage.

The marriage of man and woman is God-made and God-given. God created the woman for the man. God created the woman in response to man's need for a "suitable helper." Genesis 2:18–22 says:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

God "custom-made" the woman for the man. The man's response confirms this: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23). Same-sex marriage rejects the fact that the woman was created for the man.

The marriage of man and woman is an expression of the Image of God. God made the man and the woman as indi-

viduals, each bearing His image. Yet the man and the woman were also created in the image of God together. They were not made in the image of God only as individuals, but also together as husband and wife:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

Same-sex marriage violates the created image of God.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. Male and female He created them, and He blessed them and named them Man when they were created. (Genesis 5:1–2)

Same-sex marriage distorts the created essence of human nature.

The marriage of man and woman is the object of God's blessing. What God had made, God blessed:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

Same sex marriage rejects this blessing of God.

The marriage of man and woman has a greater, theological significance in light of God's Word of Law and Gospel. In terms of the Law, the marriage of man and woman determines the order of authority in the family and the church. Paul writes, "But now I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3; see also 11:4–16). Also:

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. (1 Timothy 2:11–13)

In terms of the Gospel, the marriage of man and woman is a picture of God's relationship to His people (Isaiah 62:4–5; Romans 7:1–4; 2 Corinthians 11:1–3; Revelation 19:6–9; 21:2, 9). Again, Ephesians 5:21–33 calls the marriage of man and woman a profound mystery by which God shows us Christ's sacrificial love for the church. Same-sex marriage distorts the mystery of marriage.

Finally, the marriage of man and woman has a divine procreative purpose. God told the first man and woman, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Same-sex marriage is incapable of fulfilling this procreative purpose.

Genesis 1:31 says, "God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good." Marriage is founded in

God's creation of mankind. This relationship is God-pleasing. This relationship is God-made and God-given. It has greater theological meaning and fulfills God's procreative purpose for mankind. At every point, same-sex marriage trades God's creation for man's invention.

What Does the Bible Say about Homosexual Behavior?

The Bible clearly forbids homosexual behavior. Here is a brief overview of the important passages:

In Genesis 19:1–29 God destroyed Sodom, Gomorrah, and other neighboring towns because of their "grave sin" (Genesis 18:20), including homosexuality (Genesis 19:4–5). 2 Peter 2:7–8 calls the sin "the sensual conduct of the wicked" and "lawless deeds." Jude 7 says these "[men] indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire."

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 say, "You shall not lie with a male as with a female," adding that to do so is "an abomination."

Judges 19:14–29 calls the homosexual intentions of certain "worthless fellows," "wicked" and an "outrageous thing."

1 Kings (14:24; 15:12; 22:46) and 2 Kings (23:7) describe and condemn the practice of male prostitution at pagan religious sites. This cultic prostitution is commonly understood to have been homosexual activity.

In Romans 1:26–27, Paul describes homosexual activity as "dishonorable passions," "contrary to nature,"

“shameless acts,” and “error.” He describes homosexual activity, along with other sins, as a consequence of man’s rejection of God Himself.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, Paul includes the unrepentant homosexual among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. In 1 Timothy 1:9–10, he includes homosexual behavior among those things that are “contrary to sound doctrine.” Paul most likely coins a word to describe the homosexual in these two passages. Paul’s term, ἀρσενοκοίτης (*arsenokoites*), is a compound word: ἄρσεν (*arsen*), “a male,” + κοίτη (*koite*), “conjugal bed,” can be literally translated, “one who takes a man to bed.”

Is Jesus silent on homosexual behavior? Jesus never mentions homosexual behavior per se in the New Testament Gospels. However, to claim that Jesus thereby approves of homosexual behavior ignores the fact that Jesus confirms the Old Testament in its entirety—including its condemnation of homosexual behavior:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17–19; see also John 5:39)

We cannot pit Jesus against the Old Testament. Nor can we pit Jesus against His apostles, Paul, Peter, or Jude—all of whom condemn homosexual behavior.

Why Do Gays and Lesbians Want to Marry?³

Homosexual couples already enjoy many privileges. They can have a “wedding” (in some liberal churches), live together, engage in intimacy, and, in some states, adopt children, share and inherit property, and so forth. With all this, why push for same-sex marriage? What does the homosexual couple get from state-licensed same-sex marriage that they can’t get through other means? State-licensed same-sex marriage gives them legal recognition, legitimacy, and approval of their behavior.

Recognition, legitimacy, and approval; this is what the same-sex marriage debate is really about.

In addition, state-licensed same-sex marriage also codifies several related ideas:

- Homosexual behavior is a normal alternative to heterosexual behavior.
- The sexes are interchangeable.
- Parenthood can be defined as we wish.
- The family can be defined as we wish.
- Gender, marriage, parenthood, and family are the product of culture.

Until now, gender, marriage, parenthood, and family were considered products of God's created order. Gender, marriage, parenthood, and family were believed to be the foundation of civilization and culture. State-licensed same-sex marriage would turn all of that on its head.

If we can redefine marriage as something other than a man and a woman, we can redefine marriage as anything other than a man and a woman. The same-sex marriage debate threatens to open a Pandora's box of alternatives to "traditional" marriage. When gender, marriage, parenthood, and family are cut loose from God's created order, they can be redefined as anyone sees fit.

Responding to Arguments for Same-Sex Marriage in the Church

Our culture is dismissing the sensibilities of the past. It is said that past cultural sanctions against homosexual behavior were based on fear and hatred. It is said these sanctions were an imposition of personal religious beliefs on society. It is said that society's views of sexuality and marriage are evolving. To stand against same-sex marriage is to block the progress of civilization.

Very similar arguments have gained currency within the church. Instead of questioning cultural sanctions, these arguments question Holy Scripture. It is said that Bible passages forbidding homosexual behavior merely reflect the author's personal bigotry or ancient cultural taboos. It is said that such pas-

sages only forbid promiscuous homosexual behavior or cultic prostitution and not same-sex marriage. It is said that such passages have been misinterpreted and misapplied. It is said that the church's views of sexuality and marriage are evolving. To stand against same-sex marriage is to resist the move of God.

The parallels are striking. Some in the church have adopted the thinking of the culture and thereby found a way to disregard the clear Word of God.

Recently, these arguments (applied to different Bible passages) have resulted in the acceptance of cohabitation, adultery, divorce, and the ordination of women in parts of the church. Today they are being used to argue for the acceptance of homosexual behavior and of same-sex marriage in the church.

The burden of proof lies with advocates of homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage. However, that should not keep us from responding to their arguments. How do we respond?

Argument: Bible passages forbidding homosexual behavior merely reflect the author's personal bigotry.

Response: This argument is *ad hominem* (a personal attack that does not address the issue itself). It attempts to discredit the biblical author's statements by accusing him of bad motivation. There is no evidence of personal bigotry in the texts (1 Thessalonians 2:3-4). Additionally, this argument "proves" too much. If it is true, then Moses, Paul, and others are guilty of passing off their personal prejudices as

God's Word and nothing they say should be trusted. How can the reader ever know if he is reading the Word of God or the opinion of men (2 Peter 1:20–21)?

Argument: Bible passages forbidding homosexual behavior merely reflect ancient cultural taboos.

Response: On the contrary, the surrounding pagan cultures of the Old and New Testaments were largely accepting of homosexual behavior. In its day, the Bible's condemnation of homosexual behavior was counter-cultural (Romans 12:2; Leviticus 18:24–30).

Argument: Bible passages that seem to condemn homosexual behavior actually condemn inhospitable behavior, promiscuity, or pagan temple prostitution.

Response: While some passages could refer to something other than homosexual behavior, others are quite unambiguous: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman" (Leviticus 18:22); and "Men . . . gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another" (Romans 1:27).

Argument: If laws forbidding homosexual behavior are still binding, then so is every obscure Old Testament law (stoning of adulterers, not mixing seed in a field, etc.).

Response: This argument ignores the distinction between the ceremonial, civil, and moral laws of the Old Testament. The ceremonial

and civil laws were binding upon Israel as part of God's first covenant (Galatians 6:15; Colossians 2:16–17; Hebrews 10:1). The moral laws, including those about homosexual behavior, carry over into the New Covenant era, because God's moral nature does not change (Colossians 3:5–11).

Argument: God forbade homosexual behavior in the past only to accommodate our spiritual immaturity. God really desires that we accept homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage.

Response: This is a rehash of the first two arguments in a different form. It proves too much. If true, there would be no way to know God's will on any issue; every Bible passage would be provisional. Also, if true, this would mean that God acted deceptively in the past by forbidding homosexual behavior. Isaiah 40:8 says, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever."

Argument: God is doing a new thing. To stand against same-sex marriage is to resist the move of the Spirit.

Response: This argument abandons the pretense of biblical authority altogether. Apart from Scripture, how do I distinguish the "thing" that God is supposedly doing from the "thing" that I want to do? Any "new thing" can be justified using this argument (Jeremiah 23:21–40).

Responding to Arguments for Same-Sex Marriage in the Public Square

The Christian must also be able to respond to the arguments for same-sex marriage in the public square. In the church we use biblical authority. In the public square we use the arguments of reason and prudence.

Again, we should remember that the burden of proof lies with those who wish to legalize same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, the Christian in the public square can make the case for traditional marriage in several ways. The marriage of a man and woman is

- consistent with the anatomy and physiology of men and women;
- capable of producing children;
- the optimal environment for the nurture of children;
- the most stable and enduring foundation for social institutions;
- considered the norm by most societies, past and present; and
- considered worthy of legal recognition, protection, and prerogative throughout history.

The Christian in the public square must also respond to the prevailing arguments for same-sex marriage.

Argument: People should be allowed to marry whomever they want.

Response: Even heterosexuals cannot marry whomever they want. If this argument were consistently applied, we would permit a person to

marry his sibling, his offspring, his parent, or himself. We would also permit marriages between adults and minors.

Argument: Marriage has been variously defined throughout the ages. Polygamy is an example.

Response: This is true; monogamy and polygamy have coexisted and still do. However, this doesn't amount to an argument for same-sex marriage. First, just because marriage has been variously defined doesn't mean that it should have been. Second, even with polygamy, the norm has still been marriage of the opposite sexes.

Argument: Forbidding same-sex marriage is intolerant.

Response: There is a difference between tolerating a person's ideas and tolerating a person's behavior. "Some behavior is a threat to the common good. Rather than being tolerated (allowed, though disagreed with), it is restricted by law."⁴ There is also a difference between tolerance and approval. To legalize same-sex marriage would not be an act of tolerance, it would be an act of approval.

Argument: Forbidding same-sex marriage is discriminatory.

Response: This argument assumes that all discrimination is bad. The civil and criminal laws properly discriminate between people based on their behavior. We also properly discriminate based on age and maturity (young children can't drive cars or vote), training (only doctors are allowed to perform

surgery), position (only the president can sign a bill into law), and sex (men can't use the women's bathroom). Laws against same-sex marriage exercise proper discrimination by forbidding harmful unions. This is not a civil rights issue.

Argument: Forbidding same-sex marriage is like forbidding interracial marriage.

Response: This argument ignores the distinction between an immutable characteristic (skin color) and a behavior (homosexuality). An immutable characteristic is morally neutral; a behavior is not.

Argument: Banning same-sex marriage because it is immoral is "legislating morality."

Response: The state has an interest in morality. While the state cannot and does not legislate against every immoral act, it must legislate against those acts that threaten the well-being of individuals or the community.

Argument: If you forbid same-sex marriage because it is a sterile relationship, why let infertile heterosexuals marry?

Response: This is not a valid comparison. Infertile couples are capable of the procreative act; they simply lack the ability to conceive. Same-sex couples are incapable of the procreative act itself.

Argument: Forbidding same-sex marriage criminalizes homosexual love.

Response: This argument appeals to sentiment, but requires a serious response. Marriage isn't about love per se. If this were so, the vast majority of arranged marriages in history would be considered invalid. Homosexuals are free in the eyes of the law to love one another. However, the freedom to marry does not follow from the freedom to love.

Argument: Permitting same-sex marriage won't hurt heterosexual marriages.

Response: This argument is specious. It is an appeal to isolated self-interest. Should I be allowed to use illegal drugs because it won't hurt you? Our concern as citizens ought to extend beyond our own marriages to the larger society. Regardless, no one can predict what effects same-sex marriage will have.

Argument: Allowing same-sex marriage won't lead to polygamy, polyamory, pedophilia, and so forth.

Response: If we can redefine marriage as something other than a relationship between one man and one woman, we can redefine marriage to mean anything else. While the advocates for same-sex marriage may not intend it, their arguments will work just as well for polygamy, polyandry, polyamory, pedophilia, or any other "alternative" to traditional marriage.

Argument: Allowing same-sex marriage will reduce promiscuity, disease, depression, and suicide among homosexuals.

Response: This assumes that same-sex marriage will be preceded by abstinence, and remain monogamous. Sadly, apart from these factors, even heterosexual marriage has done little to reduce promiscuity or disease. Some same-sex marriage advocates have made it clear that they have no intention of maintaining monogamy as a part of same-sex marriage.⁵ The argument also assumes that the staggering rates of depression and suicide among homosexuals are the result of public disapproval and not of guilt.

The Church's Message to Gays and Lesbians

Martin Luther wrote:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.⁶

The church must join the battle where the battle rages so that the church might confess Christ. The church's defense of marriage serves an even more important purpose: the preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name (Luke 24:47). Dr. Russell Moore wrote:

Our pulpits communicate well the "wrongness" of same-sex unions. But too often we sound like a "constituency" arguing for our rights to the status quo. . . . We should speak more about what is at stake for those tempted to follow the lie of homosexual liberation. . . . With this the case, we should oppose same-sex "marriage" not just because we believe Romans 1, but also because we believe John 3:16. And the culture should see us as broken-hearted revivalists, not just outraged moralists. We shouldn't see homosexuality simply as a threat to family values in the abstract. We should weep that it is also a Roman road to hell — for real people with faces, names, and church letters.⁷

Beyond the debate over same-sex marriage, the church's enduring message to gays and lesbians remains one of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name. It is our message to all sinners—including ourselves.

We plead for repentance. Advocates of same-sex marriage want to redefine marriage so that they can legitimize their sin and assuage their guilty consciences. But this is exactly what all sinners—including us—do. We want to redefine the circumstances of life to legitimize our sin. We concoct bogus arguments to excuse ourselves. We recognize the self-justification of the same-sex marriage advocate because we have firsthand experience with self-justification.

The church is for sinners only. It is

from this perspective that the church preaches repentance to the homosexual man or woman. We urge them to join us in repentance. We preach the Law in all its sternness, knowing that we also fall short of its demands. We plead as sinners with fellow sinners, "Repent."

We proclaim forgiveness in Jesus' name. D. T. Niles said, "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread." The church shows the repentant homosexual man or woman the Bread of Life, Jesus, whose perfect life, death, and resurrection cleanses us from all sin. We preach the message of the Cross, knowing that we also live only because Jesus died for us.

We sustain the repentant and forgiven sinner with the means of grace. The church preaches repentance and forgiveness not only to unbelievers, but to believers too. The church nourishes the life of repentance and forgiveness of sin through Holy Baptism and the regular use of Confession and Absolution and of the Lord's Supper. In these Sacraments Jesus Himself continues to forgive sin and strengthen faith.

We offer the mutual consolation of those who live in daily repentance and forgiveness. The church gathers repentant sinners around God's Word for study and encouragement. In this way Christians learn to bear one another's burdens and to encourage one another in the fruits of faith. This is especially important for those plagued by a besetting sin like homosexuality.

We plead for repentance. We proclaim forgiveness in Jesus' name. We sustain the repentant and forgiven sinner with the means of grace. We offer the mutual consolation of those who live in daily repentance and forgiveness. In other words, the church does nothing other than what it has been called to do. The church's message to gays and lesbians is its message to all sinners.

But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy mixed with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 17-25)

Christians may win or lose the same-sex marriage debate going on in our society. But in any case, the church