

IS SAME-SEX MARRIAGE A SIN?

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The recent legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States has heightened the debate on whether homosexual relations are truly sinful in consensual monogamous, same-sex marriage contexts. This article demonstrates that based upon God's definition of sin from a study of the biblical terms for sin, trespass, and iniquity, and from the biblical definition of marriage from Genesis 1–2, that all physical relations outside of the context of a one man to one woman, one flesh relationship for life is sin.

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Introduction

There are several passages in both the Old and New Testaments that specifically address differing forms of same-sex relations as sin. Those typically referenced in this context are Leviticus 18 and Romans 1. However, there are other texts which speak to this issue as well (cf. Gen. 19:1–9; Lev. 20:13; 1 Cor. 6:9). Additionally, one might expand the discussion into the numerous other passages which speak of sexual sin and all forms of immorality to bolster the argument.

For many Christians in the church today, this issue is cut and dried. There is no need to address it, discuss it, or debate it. However, even if one is convinced the issue is settled, there is still the need to give honest and thorough answers from Scripture that both teach truth (Eph. 4:11–16; 1 Tim 3:2) and refute error (Tit. 1:9). This holds true any time a biblical truth comes under attack. For contemporary Christianity, the issue of same-sex marriage is a major social, cultural, and ethical issue. The legalization of same-sex marriage has radically changed both the dynamic of the debate and popular opinion regarding the issues. It is no longer adequate to simply point to what some have referred to as the 'clobber' passages and say, "See, the Bible is clear. Same-sex relations are sin."¹ That answer alone is no longer convincing without entering into the many and varied debates concerning the applicability of each passage

¹ Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 41.

to today's society.² Several of these issues will be handled elsewhere in this journal.³ This article seeks to address the more fundamental issue behind all these arguments—i.e., the definition of marriage itself.

The contemporary legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States has raised a new challenge that, on the surface, seems to circumvent all the prohibition passages. The modern argument is that these refer to sinful same-sex relationships.⁴ But now, it is legal to establish a consensual, monogamous, same-sex marriage relationship. Since the government recognizes this as a marriage, intimate relations between consenting adults in this kind of a monogamous same-sex relationship are no longer sinful in God's sight.

In order to address this issue, the focus of this article will be on God's definitions of sin and marriage. What does God define as sin? What does God define as marriage? In answering these questions, it will become possible to determine whether God considers a legal, consensual, monogamous, same-sex marriage as acceptable or sinful.

What Does God Define as Sin?

There are three primary words used in the OT to describe sin. They have overlapping but distinct meanings. They are typically translated transgression, sin, and iniquity. David uses all three of these terms in the opening verses of Psalm 51. What is most relevant to the present discussion is the fact that he uses them in an overlapping way to describe his sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah.

² For a recent introduction to the debate and issues, see Preston Sprinkle, gen. ed., *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). For a contemporary treatment of the issues from an evangelical perspective, see Mark Christopher, *Same-sex Marriage: Is it Really the Same?* (Day One Publications, 2009). For a more recent scholarly treatment of the primary forbiddance passages, see Peter James Goeman, *The Law and Homosexuality: How Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 Should Influence the Church's Understanding of Homosexuality*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Master's Seminary, 2017).

³ See Michael A. Grisanti, "Homosexuality—An Abomination or Purely Irrelevant?: Evaluating LGBT Claims in Light of the Old Testament (Gen. 18–19; Lev. 18:22; 20:13)," *MSJ* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 115–33; Brad Klassen, "The Pauline Response to Today's Sexual and Gender Confusion," *MSJ* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 145–66; Michael Riccardi, "WWJD about LGBT?: Evaluating LGBT Claims in Light of Christ's Teaching," *MSJ* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 167–80.

⁴ This view is not new. Boswell argued in 1980 that Christianity has historically condemned only exploitive same-sex behaviors—not consensual ones. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Later works have challenged this position. See for example, Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001); Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Estancia, NM: Alamo Square, 2000). But there seems to be a contemporary agreement among the majority of pro-gay writers today that the Bible does not specifically address or condemn same-sex marriages which are both monogamous and consensual.

PSALM 51⁵

For the choir director.

A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

¹ Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.⁶

Psalm 51 begins with a heading indicating authorship (by David). It also directly relates the subject of this psalm to the events recorded in 2 Samuel 11–12 and David's sin with Bathsheba. It is a beautiful expression of repentance from sin and a petition for forgiveness from God by David. As such, a look at the way David uses the terms transgression, sin, and iniquity is helpful in defining clearly what sin is biblically.

The first word David uses is transgression [עָשָׂה]. It is typically translated as transgression or trespass. The root idea of the term is either to commit a crime (i.e., to break a law) or to rebel against an authority. It essentially describes the act of doing something forbidden by a higher authority.

David uses the word to refer to his own sins against Bathsheba and Uriah. It is not difficult to identify many ways that David crossed the line and broke several of God's commandments. In 2 Samuel 11 there is a clear record of David coveting Uriah's wife, committing adultery with her, and ordering the murder of Uriah. Each of these 'sins' are transgressions, because they cross the line and violate God's Law by doing things He has specifically forbidden (Exod. 20:13–14, 17).

The second word is sin. It is from the verbal root [תָּאַחַח] which means to miss the mark. The primary idea of this word is to fall short of a target or a standard. It was used in military contexts to describe a sling bullet that fell short of the target or missed the mark to the left or right. Later, the same word was used similarly in archery contexts. The obvious context in Psalm 51 refers to falling short of God's moral standards as expressed in His Law.

Again, it is a simple matter to see how David fell far short of God's expectations in 2 Samuel 11. The entire event is prefaced with the statement that it was "the time when kings went off to battle" (2 Sam. 11:1–2), but David was still at home and in bed. When he gets up from his bed at the end of the day (implying he has been inactive all day), he stands on his roof and notices a woman bathing. Instead of looking away, he takes note of her and—ignoring the warning of his servant ("is this not Uriah's wife?")—sent his men to take her and bring her to him. God's anointed king has fallen far short of divine expectations indeed! Instead of leading his men as a faithful king, he is taking the wife of one of his soldiers for himself.

⁵ All Bible citations are from the NAU unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Emphasis added via underline.

The final term David uses is iniquity [רָעָה]. It looks at sin from more than merely the perspective of the offense itself. It includes a sense of guilt-worthiness. A primary aspect of this word includes the fact that this action deserves to be punished because it is a perversion of God's original intention. In other words, it describes sin in a way that stresses the fact that punishment is due because what was done is a corruption of the divine intention. That is precisely what David has done here. In taking another man's wife as his own, he has twisted what God has given as a good thing (namely, physical intimacy in the context of marriage) and turned it into an immoral act (taking her for himself).

Now, when these three terms are examined together, how does God define sin? Sin is anything that falls short of God's standard, rebels against His authority, or perverts His original intention. So, when discussing sin biblically, it is not just the specific things which God forbids in Scripture that are sins. It is not even merely when one falls short of the divine intention. It includes the guilt-worthiness derived from any act which violates the original divine intention for His creation, or for any aspect of His creation. It is bigger than the specific rules and prohibitions He has given. It is any violation or twisting of the divine intention. These kinds of acts deserve to be punished eternally—even if there is not a specific prohibition that addresses it in the Scripture.

What Does God Define as Marriage?

The contemporary cultural context has legalized same-sex marriage. As such, it has defined marriage as two consenting adults in a monogamous relationship—regardless of gender. This is significant, because if it is valid, it means there may be grounds to argue that the prohibitive passages related to same-sex intimate relations do not apply in these cases. Those prohibitions are only addressing 'unbiblical same-sex' relationships—not biblical ones. Today, like never before in history, people can establish a legal, consensual, monogamous, same-sex relationship. What is more, there is not a single passage in the Bible that specifically includes a verbatim prohibition against these kinds of same-sex relationships. So, does that mean it is not sin? The answer to this question is found in God's definition of marriage.

There are many passages in Scripture that speak directly about marriage. But the biblical definition of marriage is given by God in the opening pages of Scripture. Genesis 1 is the divinely inspired account of creation. In it, the details and order of God's creative acts are recorded. It presents the creation of all things by God by divine fiat in six literal days. The week culminates in God's creation of mankind in His image (Gen. 1:26–27). What is most significant, as it relates to the subject of marriage, is that the divine act includes a direct reference to gender distinctiveness.

Genesis 1:27, God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

The unique aspect of man's creation is that he was created in God's image. However, according to this verse, God's image is equally present in both genders. God created mankind in His image. He also created both male and female genders in

that image. As such, neither is either more or less significant in the sight of God. The text goes on to elaborate on why the gender distinctiveness is essential from the beginning.

Genesis 1:28, God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Notice that God blessed 'them' (plural) and spoke to 'them' (plural). These instructions were therefore given after the events described at the end of Genesis 2. The command to be fruitful and multiply implies a marriage based upon what is seen in Genesis 2:18–25 because prior to this time Adam was alone. It is not until both the man and the woman were created and joined in a 'one-flesh' relationship that God could address 'them' and procreation (fruitful multiplication) could take place. The command to fill the earth demonstrates that physical intimacy between the man and the woman in this context is a good thing. It is intended to facilitate the filling of the earth with additional bearers of God's image. This makes it clear from the beginning that gender distinctions are purposefully part of the divine definition of marriage.

The closing statement of Genesis 1 gives God's assessment of the entirety of His creative efforts at this point.

Genesis 1:31, God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

When God finished His creative works on that sixth day, everything was precisely how He wanted it. There was no fatal flaw. There were no inconsistencies or incongruities. All of creation was exactly perfect. There was no sin until Genesis 3. There was no curse until after the fall of man. Everything was good, right, and pure. This includes the definition of marriage and the relationship of that first couple.

The reason for the narrative of Genesis 2:4–25 is to go back and fill in more details about what took place on the sixth day so that a full appreciation of the Fall in Genesis 3 is understood. Here it is explained that Adam was made by a direct act of God from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Here it is stated that man was given clear instructions regarding both God's gracious provision for him and single prohibition on him, as well as the consequences for disobedience (Gen. 2:15–17). Most important, as it relates to the subject of marriage, the very first negative assessment of creation is made by God in this chapter.

Genesis 2:18, Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

This is the first negative statement in the Bible—and, it is emphatic. It is NOT GOOD for the man to be alone. This is God's own evaluation of His creation at this point. It is also in direct contrast to His repetitive statements that 'it was good' throughout the creation week (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). This is the only time

prior to the Fall that God evaluated anything as not good. So, this is important. Something needs to change for God’s creation to be the perfect world He intends by Genesis 1:31. What is it that is not good? Man is alone. He has no *ezer-kenegdo*

[עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ]—i.e., no helper suitable for him. As Sailhamer explains, “The point of the narrative is that there was no helper who corresponded to the man among the animals. A special act of creation of the woman was necessary.”⁷

Incidentally, God does not consult the man here before He acts. Man did not spend the day in the Garden and come away with the impression he needed a mate on his own. God made this evaluation. He then paraded the animals before the man to make the point. Finally, He created the woman from the side of the man to be his *ezer-kenegdo*. This is a key point. God did what God determined was right and proper from the beginning. He is the determiner of what is good—not man. It is not about what works for man, what man prefers, or what seems best to man. This is what God Himself has established as what is good from the beginning. God made this determination completely independent of man’s input or wishes. Furthermore, all of this is prior to the Fall. So, this is before any sin has entered the created order. This is God’s definition of marriage, even before sin. So, the one man and one woman in a one-flesh relationship is not a matter of catering to a fallen condition.

The term “helper suitable to him” is a compound expression that occurs only twice in the OT. Both are right here in Genesis 2. The first word ‘helper’ [עֵזֶר] is a term that in a contemporary context typically conveys a negative or lesser sense. The helper in most professions is an assistant, a lackey, or a gofer. Somebody who runs errands, does the dirty jobs, or just stands around waiting for orders from the person they are assisting. However, in Scripture, the word is applied to God more than to anyone else. Moses describes God as a ‘help’ against the adversaries of Israel when He contends for them in battle (Deut. 33:7; see also, 33:26, 29). In Psalm 46 God is introduced as “a very present help in times of trouble.” A helper is one who helps, assists, or comes to the aid of someone in need. It does not speak to the inferiority of the helper, but to the need of the one who is being helped. It is a completely positive term in the pre-Fall Genesis 2 context. It is clear already from Genesis 2:18 that man very much needs this helper. So, while helping implies a certain functional subordination—even when it is God subordinating Himself to the needs of His people—it is not a humiliating or lesser position of value or importance.

The second term is ‘suitable to him’ [כְּנֶגְדּוֹ]. It is a compound expression that is more difficult to define than the first. It is made up of three words in Hebrew that in a wooden literal sense equate to, ‘like his opposite.’ The essence of the word is that of correspondence in a complementary sense. In other words, God said man needs a ‘helper that exactly corresponds to him.’ That is where the idea behind the English word ‘suitable’ comes from. The woman corresponds to the man in a way that makes her perfectly suited to be his helper. Perhaps Cassuto said it best when he said it means, a helper “worthy of him.”⁸

⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:46.

⁸ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, translated by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1998), 127.

The fact that God did not make another male shows that there is a necessary gender distinctiveness required for this correspondence to be complete. What Adam needed was not just another living creature to assist him in fulfilling the divine mandate of Genesis 1:26–30. What he needed was a living creature that exactly corresponded to himself as a bearer of God's image, and who was also specially created to serve as a helping complement to his role of headship. It also had to be a female in gender to coincide with his maleness to facilitate procreation. The term 'helper' identifies the functional distinction of the economic subordination between the roles. The term 'suitable' indicates an ontological equality between the persons despite the distinctives.⁹ This tandem is in complete agreement with the creation declaration in Genesis 1:26–27. God created man in His image—both male and female alike.

The dignity of femininity is rooted in this passage. Woman was created out of the side of the man (Gen. 2:21–22). It was not a separate creative act independent of God's creation of man. God made the man from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). However, He made the woman from a chunk of the man's side. Why? To demonstrate that both are from the very same substance. They are both fully bearers of God's image. They were created by God personally from the very same substance. Neither is more special or independent of the other. The man and the woman belong together since they were created by God from the very same substance. This is the reason for Adam's celebratory expression, "This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). Adam is genuinely thrilled by God's gift to him of the woman. It is because of this that marriage is referred to as a 'one-flesh' relationship throughout Scripture (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5–6; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31).

The biblical definition of marriage throughout the Bible is derived from this very text.

Genesis 2:24, For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

The expression 'for this reason' ties this definition of marriage back to the events of creation in Genesis 2 and establishes it as the pattern moving forward. Adam did not leave his parents since he was created directly by God. So, this verse defines marriage from that point. But, the definition stems from that original pairing.

A man leaves from under the headship of his parents and establishes a new household. He is then joined to his wife. This is how a marriage relationship is enacted because it matches what God established from the dawn of creation. There is no direct reference to the woman leaving from under the authority of her parents because that is a given. She transfers from under the headship of her parents to under

⁹ By itself, the procreation requirement demonstrated from the text of Genesis 1 and 2 justifies the gender distinctives necessary for a biblical marriage. However, this does not rule out that there are additional personal, social, emotional, and relational distinctives that are also included in the complementary creative makeup of the woman. Male to male relationships are not the same as male to female relationships. It is this writer's conviction that part of the greatness of woman is the fact that she has been created by God with a unique correspondence to man that gives her a woman's perspective on everything that is frequently different than a man's. This is divinely intended to have a balancing and enriching effect on a marriage relationship.

the headship of her husband. When they are joined together, they form a new one-flesh relationship as husband and wife.

This one-flesh relationship is first and foremost about a change in loyalties and identity. Both transfer from their parents' household into a new one they form together. They then cling to each other exclusively and co-exist in that one-flesh relationship from that point onward. This is a permanent and exclusive relationship as man and wife. It necessarily includes physical intimacy between the two since (1) procreation is part of the divine mandate (Gen. 1:28), and (2) intimate relations outside of marriage are forbidden based on this same terminology (1 Cor. 6:16).

So, God's definition of marriage is one man joined to one woman in a one-flesh relationship for life. The two are to become one flesh. That is, two people with gender distinctiveness, joined together for life as though they were one flesh. This explains why polygamy is wrong. This explains why same-sex marriage is wrong. This explains why physical intimacy in all forms outside the context of a biblical marriage are wrong. The answer is, they are all wrong because they are contrary to what God has defined as a marriage.¹⁰

So, Is Same-Sex Marriage Sin?

Once same-sex marriage is legalized in society, Romans 13 is no longer violated by a same-sex relationship. As such, it is just a matter of whether it is a biblical marriage or not. Some may argue that a consensual male/male or female/female relationship may be able to equate this 'one flesh' relationship today if they agreed to functionally subordinate roles. If one agreed to assume the role of headship and the other serve as helper, could they not then essentially function in the same capacity?

There is certainly no gender limitation on the term helper. Anyone can serve in this capacity. Likewise, headship can be exercised in varying capacities by both genders. Mothers exercise authority over their children regularly. Women serve in positions of government and industry quite effectively. However, the question is not, could it work? The question is, is it biblical? The clear answer is, no.

Same-sex marriage is a sin for many reasons. First, the divine pattern for marriage was established in Genesis 1–2. It began with gender equality and distinctiveness (Gen. 1:26–27) as well as role distinctives (Gen. 2:18). The original pair was composed of one male and one female.¹¹ Second, the divine mandate included not only a joint exercise of dominion over creation, but also a command to procreate

¹⁰ See M. W. Christopher, "A Grammatical-Historical Critique of the Pro-Gay Hermeneutic in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13," (MTh Diss., North-West University, 2016) 107–11 on the creation ordinance of Genesis 1–2 as a necessary precursor for the sexual ethics detailed in the Mosaic Law. Christopher explains that the "7th Command is informed by a creational understanding of marriage" (110).

¹¹ As an added note: Those who seek to dispense with the gender-distinction requirement, still recognize that the numerical limitation in marriage is for only two people. However, this is an incongruous argument. To suggest gender distinction is no longer necessary but the numerical requirement still applies is selective and dishonest. If marriage is no longer an exclusive monogamous union between a man and a woman, then who is to say it should be limited to only 2 people? Either Scripture and the pattern divinely established at creation is God's standard or it is not. The original created pattern is one man and one woman in a permanent one-flesh relationship for life.

which requires gender distinctives (Gen. 1:28). Third, the divine provision of a suitable helper involved the creation of a woman as the response to the divine evaluation, 'it is not good for man to be alone.' This, at the very least, implies that part of the distinctiveness of the feminine gender is a woman's ability to be the perfect complement to a man. While all marriages today are marred by fallen human nature, this fact remains. Part of the created uniqueness of a woman is her ability to relate in a complementary way to a man.

Furthermore, Scriptures continue to affirm the same pattern for marriage throughout. God established marriage as a one-flesh relationship between one man and one woman in the beginning (Gen. 2:24). Jesus confirmed that as the pattern in His teaching. In fact, when He is questioned about divorce, He makes two appeals to the Genesis narrative (Matt. 19:3–6).

Matthew 19:4–6, And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH?' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

It is worth noting that Jesus references both Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. He cites both the creation of the man and woman with gender distinctiveness and the establishment of marriage as a one-flesh relationship. However, the issue of divorce is settled simply by a reference to the latter text. There is no need to specifically reference that God made them "male and female" unless that is fundamentally the definition of marriage—which it is.

Finally, the apostle Paul also based his definition of marriage on Genesis 2:24. His instructions to wives and husbands in Ephesians 5:22–33 clearly identify the divine expectations on both husbands and wives. The expectations are unique and specific. But, he established the basis for these expectations firmly on Genesis 2:24 when he quotes it directly in Ephesians 5:31. God's definition of marriage is the same after the Fall as it was before. It is the same after Christ as it was before. It is founded upon the same clear divine declaration of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 throughout.

Conclusion

Same-sex marriage is a sin, regardless of what society says. It is a sin because it falls short of what God established in Genesis 1 and 2 as the definition of marriage, which is a one man and one woman, one flesh relationship, for life. It is a trespass because it rebels against God's right and authority to define the pattern for marriage within His creation to begin with. It also violates several biblical commands which specifically prohibit same-sex physical relations. It is iniquity because it is a perversion of the original divine design for marriage and is therefore as worthy of eternal condemnation as any other sin.

Now, it is essential given the volatile nature of this debate today to add in a final note. Same-sex marriage is an eternally condemnable sin. But it is just as worthy of divine wrath as any number of other sins! Adultery is a sin, a trespass, and iniquity

because it too violates God's definition of marriage (Matt. 19:3–6). Divorce is a sin, trespass, and iniquity because it destroys a marriage God intends to be permanent and results in adultery in the case of remarriage (Matt. 5:31–32). Sex of any kind, outside of the context of a biblical marriage, is a sin, trespass, and iniquity—even if two people love each other and intend to marry—because it is contrary to God's Word. Christians need to keep these truths clearly in mind. It is just as essential to address same-sex marriage as a sin, as it is other sins. It is likewise just as essential to call LGBT advocates to repentance and invite them into the kingdom, as it is to share Christ with anyone else. LGBT advocates are sinners in need of Christ just like everyone else. It is time for all Christians in the context of this debate to echo the sentiments of John Bradford, "There but for the grace of God go I."