



DURSLEY TABERNACLE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

SAME SEX MARRIAGE CONVERSATIONS

OCT
2024



Inspired by Jesus, walking his way of radical
love to make a difference in this world

CONTEXT

The Christian church's discussions around the same-sex marriage question have become a central issue dividing those with conservative and liberal views in the church. Many have argued that this is one of the main reasons why church attendance in the 21st Century is in decline.

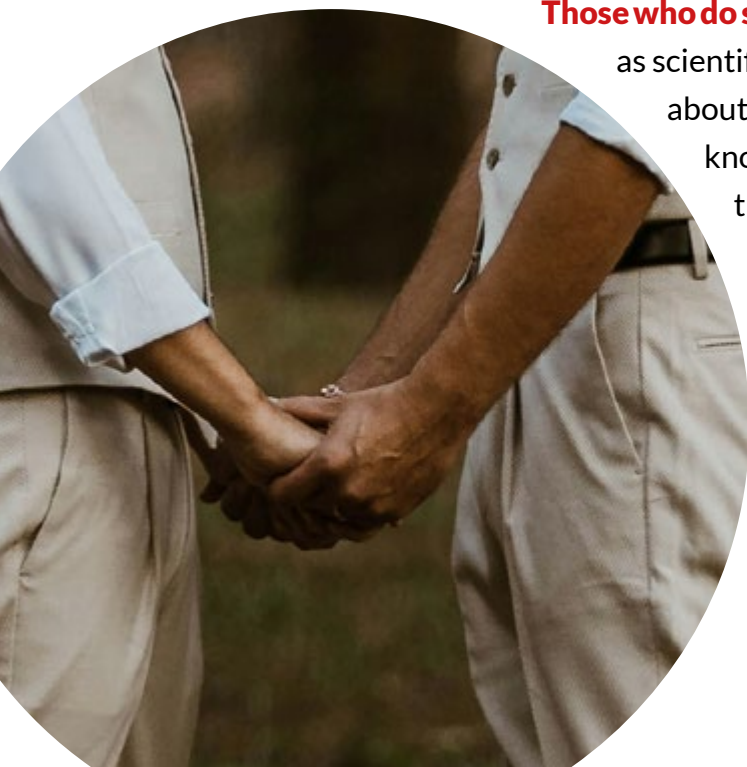
On 9th July 2016 the United Reformed Church General Assembly made a declaration that, as a denomination, it was unable to adopt a single view on the matter of the marriage of same-sex couples. Since then, it has allowed individual churches to decide on whether to permit the marriage of same-sex couples on their premises or not. The URC was the first mainstream denomination to permit same-sex marriages, although in 2021 the Methodist Conference made the same decision. In 2017 Dursley Tabernacle voted on the subject and, although the majority of church members felt that same-sex marriages should be permitted at Dursley Tabernacle, it was decided not to proceed at that time because the majority was small. It was agreed that the subject should be revisited after seven years and so now, in 2024, we return to the discussion.

The topic is difficult for three reasons:

- a. Over time there have been changes in **scientific understanding** of gender and sexuality.
- b. Over time and in different cultures there are different views about the nature and purpose of **marriage**.
- c. There are different translations and different interpretations of a small number of key passages in **the Bible**.

Those who do not support same-sex marriage tend to argue that 2,000 years of church teaching has not allowed same-sex marriage and that marriage can only exist between a man and a woman. Many believe that any kind of same-sex sexual attraction is not normal or natural and is not in keeping with the will of God. They argue that certain passages in the Bible condemn any expression of a homoerotic nature.

Those who do support same-sex marriage tend to argue that just as scientific knowledge has challenged some of our thinking about God's methods of creation, our better scientific knowledge now challenges traditional teaching on the topic of same-sex attraction and what is normal or natural. They suggest that there are many inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bible and that the Bible passages in question need to be translated with care and understood in the specific social and cultural contexts of the ancient world, which do not necessarily apply to people today.



SCIENTIFIC UNDERSTANDING

The sex chromosome was first identified in 1921 and it wasn't until 1985 that the Y chromosome was identified as the factor determining maleness. It is now understood that different hormones influence the development of sexual organs and that a range of clinical 'syndromes' can result in individuals being born with ambiguous genitalia. The science of gender diversity and intersex individuals is still in its earliest stages and is not necessarily relevant in the same-sex marriage discussion, but it is important to consider just how recently our scientific understanding of sex and gender has developed and how it is still developing.

Darwin's book '*On The Origin of Species*' was published in 1859 and its theories of evolution challenged theological understanding of what it means to be human and of concepts such as 'original sin' and 'the fall'. Some people use the theory of evolution to argue the importance of procreation, but Darwin himself observed that many different types of animal have developed whole groups of individuals which are sterile and cannot reproduce. These individuals have an evolutionary function to support the wider development of their species. Many animal species exhibit homoerotic behaviour and this behaviour can have a range of functions and purposes.

Darwin's discoveries led to a huge change in thinking. Possibly the first scientific theories of human homosexuality were proposed in 1864/65 by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. Before this time there was no vocabulary to discuss the concept of homosexuality. This is an important detail to consider when encountering the word 'homosexual' in any modern biblical translation (see comment on 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 below). It wasn't until the work of Kinsey in the 1940s and 1950s, using datasets from 18,000 case studies, that solid scientific conclusions could be drawn. In the UK, this science eventually led to the Wolfenden Report of 1957 which stated that homosexuality is neither an abnormality nor a disease. This report, in its turn, paved the way for the decriminalisation of homoerotic acts in UK law in 1967 and ultimately the recognition of legal same-sex partnerships from 2005. Research about genetic causes for homoerotic attraction is ongoing, but current thinking is that it is a combination of biological and social/cultural factors. In 2014, the World Health Organisation concluded that 'internationally, homosexuality and other forms of expression of same-sex orientation are stigmatized', but that 'sexual orientation by itself is not to be considered a disorder.'

Meanwhile, 20th Century scientific developments around contraception have changed attitudes to sex. Few would argue today that the only purpose of a sexual act is for procreation. As our understanding of the impact of the earth's human population on climate change develops, we become aware that unmanaged population growth could be a contributory factor in the earth's destruction. Human stewardship of our planet no longer depends on going forth and multiplying as much as possible.



MARRIAGE

In the earliest times, humans entered into relationships for a range of reasons, but primarily as a way of sharing the tasks of daily living. Partnerships have been established in different ways between people in different cultures and social groups. Amongst the wealthy, marriages were often financial and political alliances – a quick trawl through the history books shows that marriage for love is a fairly recent western idea. The Bible is far from consistent in its reference to marriage and the church's position has never been stable. Church rulings on marriage have been influenced as much by a desire to retain and control wealth as by any theological considerations.

There is no evidence in Genesis that Adam and Eve got married. If the only people on the earth initially were Adam and Eve and their children, then incest would have been necessary to procreate further. Leviticus has rules about marriage with those close relations which people say form the basis for modern incest laws, but even in ancient times these were not followed strictly and the rules varied. Polygamy was common throughout the Old Testament; it was culturally acceptable in such contexts but is not acceptable in British culture today. In the New Testament the Christian emphasis shifted towards celibacy, but the church has got itself in a tangle over that too. Many would argue that enforced celibacy has led to many of the sexual scandals which have rocked the church.

Marriage as a concept can therefore be seen to have been created by humans rather than by God, although it has long been established as a Christian sacrament. It is a created good, a partnership that should bring about human flourishing through faithful commitment between partners to provide companionship and a sharing of work and resources to bring blessings to each other and to the earth. Between some men and women, the sexual aspect of marriage can result in the blessing of children although in some marriages the arrival of children can bring stress and strain. Some marriages are childless because the couple are infertile, or because of a conscious choice made for any number of reasons. While the Roman Catholic

Church clings to its teachings against contraception, most Christians today concede that contraception has been a positive and life enhancing scientific development and therefore it follows that sex has other meanings and purposes in a loving relationship and that marriage is about more than just procreation.



THE BIBLE

So, which are the key passages that people often disagree over?

1. Genesis and the creation stories

Those who **do not support** same-sex marriage argue that [Genesis 1:26-28](#) tells us ‘male and female he created them’ and provides a general understanding of human sexuality as binary and mutually complementary: male and female. This gives way to arguments that God created ‘Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’. The command to ‘be fruitful and fill the earth’ is seen as an argument for the procreative purpose of marriage. The traditional argument is that marriage prevents promiscuity and that the procreative purpose of marriage underpins stable family structures. Some suggest that it is vital because God’s people are designed to procreate and play a special role in discerning God’s will for the created order and for communicating that will to the next generation.

Those who **do support** same-sex marriage argue that there are problems with translation in English versions of Genesis. In most English bibles, God is described as male, whereas in the original Hebrew text words which are male and female, singular and plural are used to describe the creator. Adam is not necessarily male. The word comes from a Hebrew word ‘Adamah’ that literally translates as ‘groundling’ or ‘creature of mud/earth’ and the second creature is not created from Adam’s ‘rib’ (making it sound like a lesser creature). The Hebrew word used is best translated as ‘side’ in the sense of one side or the other – one half. This idea that God creates a ground creature and divides it in half to give it a partner is a very different view of Genesis and it leads to a different understanding of the relationship between male and female. Furthermore, some would argue that many heterosexual marriages don’t have procreative purpose (see notes on marriage above) and that any faithful marriage can help to reduce promiscuous relationships, whether there are children in it or not. They would also claim that arguments about God’s people needing to procreate and play a special role in discerning God’s will only really apply in a Jewish cultural context where the identity of the chosen people is related to bloodlines. Christian identity is determined by faith and by baptism, not by bloodlines, and so Christians don’t need to procreate in order to produce and nurture other Christians.

2. Genesis 19 – The story of Sodom

In this story, a gang of men from Sodom surround the house of Abraham’s nephew Lot asking him to release the two (male) visiting angels to them so that they can ‘know’ them. The gang from Sodom are clearly threatening violence. Lot offers to allow the men to rape his virgin daughters rather than hurt his visitors. Eventually the angels persuade Lot and his family to leave the place and the city is destroyed because of its evil ways.

Those who **do not support** same-sex marriage argue that the verb ‘know’ has specific sexual implications and that the story is written to highlight the degrading quality of the suggestion of sexual relationships between males in this story. The word ‘sodomise’ in English has evolved

from this story to describe any act of anal penetration although such acts are not referenced specifically in the story. The population's inclination for this specific sexual act is nevertheless seen by some to be the reason why Sodom is destroyed.

Those **who do support** same-sex marriage look carefully at the translation of key words and argue that the story's main purpose is to challenge the exploitative ways in which people treat the socially vulnerable and oppressed. They argue that it is evident that the Sodom gang's actions are being condemned because they are violent, aggressive and inhospitable. They also observe that there is no connection between the violence of the Sodom gang and the intimacy between two loving and committed people in a stable relationship; it is therefore difficult to use this text in itself to support a blanket prohibition on homoerotic activity.

3. **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 - The Holiness Code**

The Holiness Code encouraged the Israelite people to be holy (separate) and pure and therefore distinct from surrounding cultures, just as different fibres are not to mix with each other in clothing. As already mentioned, the Jewish faith – unlike the Christian faith – depends on bloodlines so purity of blood was key. These two verses are translated as follows in the NRSV English bible and are the only specific references to homoerotic acts in the Old Testament:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Those who **do not support** same-sex marriage often describe these verses as prohibitions against homoerotic activity of any kind and claim that they form a kind of eleventh commandment stating that all homoerotic activity is evil/sinful. The reference to the death penalty in 20:13 and the proximity with verses forbidding marriage with those who are near of kin is said to emphasise the extra weight of how sinful these sexual practices are. It is important to note, however, that Leviticus 20:10 also specifies the death penalty for adultery, but few would support such a punishment today.

Those who **do support** same-sex marriage point to the wider list of prohibitions in the surrounding verses which include (among other things) wearing clothes made of two different materials, eating shellfish and having sex with a woman who is menstruating. None of these are banned or taboo in our culture today. Linguists observe that the Hebrew word translated as 'abomination' above is most commonly linked with actions which involve the breaking of cultural taboos or customs. It is not a Hebrew word for sin or evil. They also note that there is significant ambiguity in the many translations so that it is unclear exactly what the taboo is. One scholar has identified twelve possible interpretations of exactly what action is being described as an 'abomination' here. Certainly, there is no reference here to female/female homoerotic acts and so many argue that these verses are a) obscure, culturally specific and outdated and b) cannot be said to command a blanket ban on all homoerotic activity.

4. The Four Gospels - what does Jesus say?

In the gospels, Jesus says nothing specific about same-sex marriage or homoerotic activity and makes few comments about marriage generally. Unsurprisingly, there are many different interpretations of what he does and says.

Those who **do not support** same-sex marriage tend to focus on [Mark 10:6-8](#) and [Matthew 19:4-6](#) where the Pharisees try to trap Jesus into error by asking about his position on divorce. Part of his answer is: *'But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. 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.'* Jesus goes on to say that a divorced person who remarries is committing adultery and some use these verses to argue that marriage can only be as Jesus describes it here, between a man and a woman, and that divorce is sinful and remarriage in church should not be permitted.

Some people also use the argument 'love the sinner, hate the sin' and say that just as Jesus told the woman caught in adultery ([John 8:11](#)) to *'go your way and from now on do not sin again'*, then he would tell people who are same-sex attracted that they must not participate in any homoerotic activity because it is sinful.

Some people use these passages to argue that recognising same-sex marriage, like permitting divorced couples to remarry in church, would be part of a kind of slippery slope towards abandoning biblical teaching, dismantling the law and a slide towards a vague sort of 'anything goes' ethic.

Those who **do support** same-sex marriage argue that in [Mark 10](#) and [Matthew 19](#) Jesus draws on the Genesis definitions of male and female (already discussed), merely to emphasise the powerful, permanent commitment that people make in marriage. Jesus himself argues in these passages that the laws on divorce were made because the hearts of the people were 'hard'. Divorce at that time was used by many men to abandon women for no good reason and these women were left vulnerable. So, many people do not see this as an instruction that only male and female should marry, but simply as a reflection of the fact that this was the usual practice at that time. They do not tend to see this as a blanket condemnation of divorce, rather as an acknowledgement of the pain and distress that the breakdown of a marriage can cause, and the need to protect the vulnerable.

Supporters of same-sex marriage would argue that this would be in keeping with Jesus' constant focus on loving God, one's neighbour and oneself – the law of love becomes the central commandment which overrules all others. These references to love for God, neighbour and self, appear in [Mark 12: 28-34](#) and [Matthew 22:34-40](#). The new commandment is referenced in [John 13](#) and repeated in [John 15](#) and [Galatians 5:14](#). The Good Samaritan story appears in [Luke 10](#). This focus on love as the over-ruling law is therefore a main theme across the New Testament. On endless occasions when the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus with tricky legal questions, he pointed out that accusations about individual actions (healing or plucking corn on

the sabbath, eating with unwashed hands, rules about touching what is ritually unclean etc.) can be manipulated and it is the intentions of the heart that matter. In [Matthew 15](#), in a similar conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus argues that evil thoughts come 'out of the heart'. He lists 'murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander' as things which defile a person, but makes no attempt to pin down specific actions. This suggests to some that same-sex relationships which are faithful and loving would not be considered evil by Jesus and, had such relationships been understood in Jesus' time, they would have been included in Jesus' loving attempts to include the ritually excluded such as menstruating women, the mentally ill, lepers, tax collectors, Samaritans etc. Supporters of same-sex marriage would therefore respond to the 'slippery slope' arguments by saying that Jesus emphasised a wholehearted loving response to laws rather than picking apart individual details and twisting laws for our own purposes as the Pharisees did. If we follow the love command responsibly, there is no danger of moral decay.

Finally, some people would point to [Matthew 22:30](#) where Jesus says, '*At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.*' This comment was also offered in response to Pharisees who tried to trick Jesus into making a statement about marriage by asking about a woman who had been widowed and married multiple husbands; they wanted to know which one would be her husband in heaven. This verse suggests that Jesus himself believed marriage to be an earthly construct and not a divine one.

5. Paul's letter to the Romans 1:24-27

This passage contains two phrases often used to support the traditionalist's view: '*their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men...*'

Those who **do not support** same-sex marriage have arguments which depend on the translation of the Greek phrase *para physin* which is translated as 'contrary to nature' or 'unnatural'. They argue that this passage is clearly a reference to God's natural order of male/female anatomy and the way that male and female sexual activity naturally produces children. Unnatural could therefore mean any type of intercourse that couldn't lead to pregnancy - which would therefore rule out contraception, marriage between older couples beyond child rearing age and marriage affected by infertility. The argument suggests that physical relationships for any other purpose than procreation are sinful.

Those who **do support** same-sex marriage focus on translation and observe that *para physin* appears elsewhere in [Romans 11:24](#) to develop the metaphor of God grafting wild olive branches (Gentiles) into a cultivated olive tree (the Jewish community). They point out that if Paul understood the phrase to describe behaviour contrary to God's own created order, he would hardly have used it to reference God's own actions. They go on to argue that this text certainly seems to reference inappropriately lustful, promiscuous sexual behaviour, but that this has no connection with our modern understanding of faithful, committed same-sex

relationships. Many scholars think that it references very specific cultic sexual behaviour commonly described in many texts of this period where, for example, women dressed up as mythical creatures with large phalluses as a form of pagan idol-worship.

It must also be said that this passage is taken out of context and is actually a part of a kind of wider verbal trap where Paul appeals to listeners' prejudices with these and other exaggerated descriptions of pagan idol worshippers and then twists the argument to point out that people who make self-righteous judgements of these pagans and their behaviour are guilty of putting themselves into God's place as judge. Like Jesus before him, Paul is condemning hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Supporters of same-sex marriage would argue that it is ironic that those opposing such relationships have fallen into the same trap and used this passage to pass judgement on homosexual people.

6. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10

In 1 Corinthians there is a passage which says: *'Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.'* Similarly, in 1 Timothy there is another list of vices as follows: *'fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching.'* Discussion depends heavily on the translation of two Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. In this NRSV translation of the Corinthians passage, these words are translated as 'male prostitutes' and 'sodomites'. The second of these words is repeated in the 1 Timothy passage.

Those who **do not support** same-sex marriage tend to argue that *malakoi* is referencing effeminate men who play the roles of females, or the weaker partner in a pederastic or abusive relationship between an older man and a boy. They argue that *arsenokoitai* is a reference to the older/dominating partner in a pederastic male/male relationship. Some translations such as the Good News Bible anachronistically translate the words as 'homosexual perverts' (see note in Scientific Understanding section above). Such translations then support the argument that these two texts identify such relationships, and indeed any homoerotic behaviour, as sinful.

Those who **do support** same-sex marriage tend to argue that these vice lists, like the Holiness Code and the Ten Commandments in the early books of the Old Testament, are culturally specific lists which were commonly used at this time as a kind of rhetorical device to persuade people to behave in certain ways. Linguists observe that pederastic male/male relationships were very common in ancient Greece and there were specific words used to describe the different partners.

Terms for the older man include *erastês*, *philetor* and *pederastes* while the more passive partner was commonly referenced with words such as *eremenos*, *androgynous* or *kinaidos*. If these relationships were indeed the ones Paul was referencing, why didn't he use the Greek words available to him? Linguists say that the most literal translation of *malakoi* would be

'softies' and that this could be used to describe people who are weak or self-indulgent, but not necessarily with sexual connotations.

The translation of *arsenokoitai* is more interesting. It appears very rarely in literature of that time and appears to be a word blended together from two common words which mean 'male' and 'liars'. It is clear that the word has sexual connotations and is describing promiscuous male behaviour, but there is no evidence to suggest that it refers to men taking part purely in erotic behaviour with other men.

Once again, the argument is that these passages bear no relation to people in committed, loving same-sex relationships and there is no reference to female/female homoerotic activity.

Further Reading: Bible references are taken from the NRSV.

Many of the arguments against same-sex marriage in this paper are drawn from Robert Gagnon's book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). Much of the opposing material comes from Renato Lings' book, *Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible* (Trafford: Indiana, 2013).

All of the arguments are available in more detail in Carole Allen's MA Dissertation which is available on request.

