

Why “Gay Marriage” Is Wrong

by Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

A shortened version of this essay will appear in the September issue of [Presbyterians Today](#). Subscriptions to [Presbyterians Today](#) are available by calling 1-800-558-1669.

The vision of marriage found in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures is one of reuniting male and female into an integrated sexual whole. Marriage is not just about more intimacy. . . . It is about the (re-) merger of the two sexes.

Advocates of homosexual practice often argue that “gay marriage,” or at least homosexual civil unions, will reduce promiscuity and promote fidelity among homosexual persons. Such an argument overlooks two key points.

“Gay Marriage” as a Contradiction in Terms

First, legal and ecclesiastical embrace of homosexual unions is more likely to undermine the institution of marriage and produce other negative effects than it is to make fidelity and longevity the norm for homosexual unions. We will come back to this later.

Second, and even more importantly, homosexual unions are not wrong primarily because of their disproportionately high incidence of promiscuity (especially among males) and breakups (especially among females). They are wrong because “gay marriage” is a contradiction in terms. As with consensual adult incest and polyamory, considerations of commitment and fidelity factor only after certain structural prerequisites are met.

The vision of marriage found in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures is one of reuniting male and female into an integrated sexual whole. Marriage is not just about more intimacy and sharing one’s life with another in a lifelong partnership. It is about sexual merger—or, in Scripture’s understanding, *re-merger*—of essential maleness and femaleness.

The creation story in Genesis 2:18-24 illustrates this point beautifully. An originally binary, or sexually undifferentiated, *adam* (“earthling”) is split down the “side” (a better translation of Hebrew *tsela* than “rib”) to form two sexually differentiated persons. Marriage is pictured as the *reunion* of the two constituent parts or “other halves,” man and woman.

This is not an optional or minor feature of the story. Since the only difference created by the splitting is a differentiation into two distinct sexes, the only way to reconstitute the sexual whole, on the level of erotic intimacy, is to bring together the split parts. A same-sex erotic relationship can never constitute a marriage because it will always lack the requisite sexual counterparts or complements.

In a homoerotic union one either consciously desires in another what one already is and has as a sexual being or one mistakenly perceives a sexual same as a sexual other.

Men experiencing homoerotic desire need not seek completion in a sexual same. Rather, they must come to terms with their essential masculinity.

St. Paul clearly understood same-sex intercourse as an affront to the Creator's stamp on gender in Gen 1-2. . . We have not only eight points of correspondence between Gen 1:26-27 and Rom 1:23, 26-27 but also a threefold sequential agreement.

By definition homosexual desire is *sexual narcissism* or *sexual self-deception*. There is either (1) a conscious recognition that one desires in another what one already is and has as a sexual being (anatomy, physiology, sex-based traits) or (2) a self-delusion of sorts in which the sexual same is perceived as some kind of sexual other. As one ancient text puts it, “seeing themselves in one another they were ashamed neither of what they were doing nor of what they were having done to them” (Pseudo-Lucian, *Affairs of the Heart* 20). The modern word “homosexual”—from the Greek *homoios*, “like” or “same”—underscores this self-evident desire for the essential sexual self shared in common with one’s partner.

I am not talking merely about what some prohomosex advocates derisively refer to as an “obsession with plumbing.” I am talking about a fundamental recognition of something holistic, an essential maleness and an essential femaleness. Why else would 99% of all persons in the United States (97% heterosexual, 2% homosexual) limit their selection of mates to persons of a particular sex? Why else do so many “gays” claim exclusive attraction for persons of the same sex rather than, say, gender nonconforming persons of the other sex? All this indicates a basic societal admission that there is an essential and holistic maleness and femaleness that transcend mere social constructs.

In this connection, too, it is interesting that homosexual men, even those who bear effeminate traits, usually desire very “masculine” men as their sex partners. Why? Undoubtedly many desire what they see as lacking in themselves: a strong masculine quality. Such a desire is really a form of self-delusion. They are already men, already masculine. They are masculine by virtue of their sex, not by virtue of possessing a social construct of masculinity that may or may not reflect true masculinity. They need not seek completion in a sexual same. Rather, they must come to terms with their essential masculinity.

Scripture, Creation, and a Two-Sexes Prerequisite

The New Testament recognizes the importance of the Genesis creation stories for establishing a “two-sexes” or “other-sex” prerequisite for marriage.

St. Paul clearly understood same-sex intercourse as an affront to the Creator’s stamp on gender in Genesis 1-2. In his letter to the Romans, Paul cites two prime examples of humans suppressing the truth about God evident in creation/nature: idolatry and same-sex intercourse (1:18-27). Paul talks first about humans exchanging the Creator for worship of idols made “in the *likeness* of the *image* of a perishable *human* and of *birds* and *animals* and *reptiles*” (1:23); then about “*females* [who] exchanged the natural use” and “*males* leaving behind the natural use of the female” to have intercourse with other “males” (1:26-27). This obviously echoes Genesis 1:26-27: “Let us make a *human* according to our *image* and . . . *likeness*; and let them rule over the . . . *birds* . . . *cattle* . . . and . . . *reptiles*. And God created the human in his image, . . . *male* and *female* he created them.” Taken together, we have not only eight points of correspondence between Gen 1:26-27 and Rom 1:23, 26-27 but also a threefold sequential agreement:

- A. God's likeness and image in humans
- B. Dominion over the animal kingdom
- C. Male-female differentiation

It would be fair to say that if there is no intertextual echo here, then there is no such thing as an intertextual echo, as opposed to direct citation, in all of the New Testament.

What is the point of this echo? Idolatry and same-sex intercourse constitute a frontal assault on the work of the Creator in nature. Those who suppressed the truth about God transparent in creation were more likely to suppress the truth about the complementarity of the sexes transparent in nature, choosing instead to gratify contrary innate impulses.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9 Paul mentions “men who lie with males” (*arsenokoitai*)—a term formed from the absolute prohibitions of man-male intercourse in Lev 18:22 and 20:13—in a list of offenders that risk not inheriting the kingdom of God. Just as Romans 1:26-27 has Genesis 1:27 in view, so too 1 Corinthians 6:9 has Genesis 2:24 in view (partially cited in 1 Cor 6:16): “For this reason a *man* . . . shall be joined to his *woman* (wife) and the two will become one flesh.” Taken in the context of Paul’s remarks in chs. 5 (a case of adult incest) and 7 (male-female marriage), there is little doubt that Paul understood the offense of “men who lie with males” as the substitution of another male for a female in sexual activity; or, put differently, the abandonment of an other-sex structural prerequisite for a holistic sexual union.

As with the case of the incestuous man, Paul would have found absurd any argument that suggested marriage as a means to avoiding sexual immorality. Same-sex intercourse, like incest, is a far greater instance of sexual immorality than infidelity. If it were otherwise, the church would be compelled to validate all committed incestuous unions. Same-sex intercourse, like man-mother incest, is not substantially improved by the manifestation of fidelity and longevity. Indeed, making the relationship long-term only regularizes the sin.

That Paul did not limit his opposition to homosexual practice only to certain exploitative forms is evident both from his indictment of lesbian intercourse in Romans 1:26 and from the advocacy for non-exploitative homoerotic behavior that persisted in many quarters of the Greco-Roman world. Moreover, modern views about “homosexual orientation” would have made little difference to Paul’s critique. There were “pagan” moralists and physicians who both posited something akin to homosexual orientation and held such desires to be “contrary to nature” even when given “by nature.” We know that Paul viewed sin as an innate impulse, operating in the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor, and never entirely within human control.

It is not mere coincidence that when *Jesus* dealt with an issue of sexual behavior in Mark 10:2-12 he cited the same two texts from Genesis, 1:27 and 2:24, that lie behind Paul’s critique of homosexual practice. Jesus adopted a “back-to-creation” model of sexuality. He treated Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as

Just as Romans 1:26-27 has Genesis 1:27 in view, so too 1 Corinthians 6:9 has Genesis 2:24 in view.... The context of chs. 5 and 7 leave little doubt that Paul understood the offense of “men who lie with males” as the substitution of another male for a female in sexual activity.

It is not mere coincidence that when Jesus dealt with an issue of sexual behavior in Mark 10:2-12 he cited the same two texts from Genesis, 1:27 and 2:24, that lie behind Paul’s critique of homosexual practice.

Jesus was not suggesting that lifelong monogamy was a more important consideration for sexual relations than the heterosexual (i.e. other-sexual) dimension.

There are many other sayings of Jesus, besides Mark 10:6-9, that, taken in the context of early Judaism, implicitly forbade same-sex intercourse.

The portrait of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is of someone who, instead of loosening the law, closed its loopholes and intensified its demands (Matthew 5:17-48).

normative and prescriptive for the church (Mark 10:6-9). In contending for the indissolubility of marriage, Jesus clearly presupposed the one explicit prerequisite in Gen 1:27 and 2:24; namely, that there be a male and female, man and woman, to effect the “one flesh” reunion.

Jesus was not suggesting that lifelong monogamy was a more important consideration for sexual relations than the heterosexual (i.e. other-sexual) dimension. Rather, he narrowed further an already carefully circumscribed sexual ethic given to him in the Hebrew Bible. Sexual behavior mattered for Jesus. In the midst of Jesus’ sayings on sex in Matthew 5:27-32 appears the following remark: If your eye or hand should threaten your downfall, cut it off. It is better to go into heaven maimed than to have one’s whole body be sent to hell.

There are many other sayings of Jesus, besides Mark 10:6-9, that, taken in the context of early Judaism, implicitly forbade same-sex intercourse. These include: the reference to “sexual immoralities” (*porneiai*) in Mark 7:21, a term that for Jews of the Second Temple period called to mind the forbidden sexual offenses in Lev 18 and 20, particularly incest, adultery, same-sex intercourse, and bestiality (cf. the prohibition of *porneia* in the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15, formulated with the sex laws in Lev 18 in view); Jesus’ affirmation of the seventh commandment against adultery in Mark 10:17-22, which presupposes the preservation of the male-female marital bond (cf. the reference to not coveting one’s neighbor’s wife in the tenth commandment) and could be used in early Judaism as a rubric for treating the sex laws in the Bible, including the proscriptions of male-male intercourse (cf. Philo, *Special Laws*, 3); Jesus’ acknowledgement of Sodom’s role in Scripture as the prime example of abuse of visitors in Matt 10:14-15 par. Luke 10:10-12, which in the context of other early Jewish texts indicates a special revulsion for the attempt at treating males sexually as females (e.g., Philo, Josephus, *Testament of Naphtali* 3:3-4; 2 *Enoch* 10:4; 34:1-2; within Scripture, Ezek 16:50; Jude 7; and 2 Pet 2:6-10 also point in this direction); and Jesus’ warning against giving “what is holy to the dogs” (Matt 7:6), a likely echo to Deut 23:17-18 which forbids the wages of a “dog” or *qadesh* (lit., the self-styled “holy man,” “sacred one,” but often translated “male temple prostitute”) from being used to pay a vow to the “house of Yahweh” (for “dog,” cf. Rev 22:15 with Rev 21:8).

The unanimous and unequivocal opposition to same-sex intercourse that persisted in early Judaism and in early Christianity leaves little doubt about what Jesus’ view was. The portrait of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is of someone who, instead of loosening the law, closed its loopholes and intensified its demands (Matthew 5:17-48). Jesus did devote his ministry to seeking out the “lost” and “sick,” such as sexual sinners and the biggest economic exploiters of Jesus’ day (tax collectors). Yet he did so in the hope of bringing about their restoration through grateful repentance. He understood the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; cited in Mark 12:30) in its context, which included the command to “reprove your neighbor and so not incur guilt because of him” (Leviticus 19:18). Continual forgiveness was available to those who sinned *and* repented (Luke 17:3-4). Jesus’ requirement for discipleship was self-denial, self-

It is a relatively easy matter to demonstrate that in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity, the only form of “consensual” sexual behavior regarded as a more severe infraction than homosexual practice was bestiality.

The social-scientific evidence to date does not encourage the notion that validating homosexual unions is a win-win situation.

The introduction of same-sex registered partnerships in Scandinavia has coincided with a sharp rise in out-of-wedlock births.

Divorce rates for same-sex registered partnerships are significantly higher than for opposite-sex married couples.

crucifixion, and the losing of one’s life (Mark 8:34-37; Matthew 10:38-39). It is time to deconstruct the false portrait of a sexually tolerant Jesus.

Space does not permit a fuller exploration of the evidence from Scripture. For that I refer readers to my books and articles. There I also show, through examination of literary and historical contexts and the history of interpretation, that the story of Sodom in Genesis 19:4-11, like the stories of the Levite at Gibeah in Judges 19:22-25 and Ham’s act against Noah in Genesis 9:20-27, is intended as an indictment of male-male intercourse per se, not merely of coercive acts; that the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are not antiquated purity laws; and indeed that every text in Scripture that has anything to do with sexual relations presupposes an unalterable heterosexual requirement. It is a relatively easy matter to demonstrate that in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity, the only form of “consensual” sexual behavior regarded as a more severe infraction than homosexual practice was bestiality. The historical evidence indicates that every author of Scripture, as well as Jesus, would have been appalled by homosexual relationships, committed or otherwise.

The Social-Scientific Case against “Gay Marriage”

Returning to the first point, the social-scientific evidence to date does not encourage the notion that validating homosexual unions is a win-win situation. A series of articles in 2004 by Stanley Kurtz, a Harvard-trained social anthropologist and fellow at the Hoover Institution, show that **the introduction of same-sex registered partnerships in Scandinavia has coincided with a sharp rise in out-of-wedlock births**. In articles published in *The Weekly Standard* ([2/2/04](#), [5/31/04](#)), *National Review Online* ([2/2/04](#), [2/5/04](#), [5/04/04](#), [5/25/04](#), [6/03/04](#), [7/21/04](#)), and elsewhere, Stanley Kurtz has shown that in Sweden and Norway from 1990 to 2000—that is, in the period roughly coinciding with the introduction of same-sex registered partnerships (now almost de facto “gay marriage”)—out-of-wedlock births have increased roughly 10%. In Denmark about 60% of firstborn children now have unmarried parents. Since the introduction of registered partnerships in the Netherlands in 1997, out-of-wedlock births have increased annually there by two percentage points—double the average annual increase of the previous 15 years. The passage of official (not just de facto) same-sex marriage in 2000 did nothing to slow this national increase in 2001, 2002, and 2003. None of this is surprising given that homosexual unions are *structurally* incapable of producing children from the union and therefore depend on rhetoric that ultimately decouples marriage from the raising of children.

Moreover, [a 2004 study](#) of **divorce rates for same-sex registered partnerships** in Sweden from 1995 to 2002 indicates that, compared to opposite-sex married couples, male homosexual couples were 1.5 times more likely to divorce and female homosexual couples 3 times more likely. As time passes and it becomes possible to inquire about same-sex registered partnerships of more than one-to-seven-years’ duration, we should see even larger differences between heterosexual and homosexual unions.

Only a tiny minority of the homosexual population has taken advantage of civil recognition of homosexual unions.

“Gay marriage” ends up being more about validating the homosexual life than about... stabilizing homosexual unions.

When society continually calls “marriages” unions that invariably end in divorce or turn into “open relationships,” the cheapening effect on the institution of marriage will be inevitable.

“Gay marriage” will have at least three other catastrophic effects. First, we can expect an end to any structural prerequisites (e.g., monogamy, no incest).

It is important to note, too, that only a tiny minority of the homosexual population has taken advantage of civil recognition of homosexual unions. According to [the 2004 study](#) cited above, the number of same-sex registered partnerships contracted in Sweden from 1995 to 2002 is only one-half of one percent of the number of opposite-sex marriages created in the same interval (compare .7% for Norway). Yet homosexual persons comprise roughly two-to-three percent of the population. (Note that this suggests that, as bad as the divorce rates are for Swedish same-sex registered partnerships, they still represent the best of the best in the homosexual population.) The Netherlands has had full-fledged “gay marriage” since Apr. 1, 2001. From then until Apr. 2004, only three percent of all adult homosexuals and one out of ten homosexual couples have chosen to get married. By contrast, the number of persons in an other-sex marriage account for sixty percent of the adult Dutch population (seventy-five percent if one counts those widowed or divorced; for these figures go [here](#)). In effect, the institution of marriage is made to suffer for the sake of a tiny percentage of the homosexual population. Whatever the motivations of its proponents, “gay marriage” ends up being more about validating the homosexual life than about strengthening marriage or stabilizing homosexual unions.

While **male homosexual unions** have a greater likelihood of longevity than female homosexual unions, they also **have a much greater likelihood of “open” relationships**. A 1994 Dutch study of “close coupled” male homosexuals showed that by the sixth year of the relationship the number of outside sex partners averaged eleven. A 1997 Australian study showed that only 13% of homosexually active males aged 50 or over had had as “few” as 1-10 sex partners “lifetime”; three-quarters had over 20 sex partners and half had over 100 (for these two studies and others, see my *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 452-60). J. Michael Bailey, chair of the psychology department at Northwestern and one of the foremost researchers of homosexuality (and prohomosex in outlook), contends that “because of fundamental differences between men and women” and “regardless of marital laws and policies,” “gay men will always have many more sex partners than straight people do. Those who are attached will be less sexually monogamous” (*The Man Who Would Be Queen* [Joseph Henry Press, 2003], 101).

Studies to date suggest that only a tiny fraction of homosexual unions will be both monogamous and of twenty years duration or more (probably less than 5%). When society continually calls “marriages” unions that almost invariably end in divorce in 1 to 10 years or turn into “open relationships,” the cheapening effect on the institution of marriage will be inevitable.

Besides severing the institution of marriage from the values of childrearing, monogamy, and longevity, “gay marriage” will have at least three other catastrophic effects.

First, we can expect an eventual **end to any structural prerequisites for a legitimate sexual relationship**. The whole “gay marriage” debate is predicated on the assumption that affective bonds trump the structural argument from Scripture and nature for an other-sex prerequisite. What logical basis will remain for denying marriage to committed sexual unions comprised of three or more

Second, there is good evidence that societal approval of homosexual practice may increase the incidence of homosexuality and bisexuality, not just homosexual practice.

Third, “gay marriage,” as the ultimate legal sanctioning of homosexual behavior, will bring with it a wave of intolerance toward, and attack on the civil liberties of, those who publicly express disapproval of homosexual practice.

persons? In fact, the limitation of two persons in a sexual union at any one time is itself predicated on the idea that two sexes are necessary and sufficient for establishing a sexual whole. Once church and society reject a two-sexes prerequisite, there will be no logical ground for maintaining the sacredness of the number two in sexual relations. It is not surprising that litigants in polygamy cases in Utah and Arizona are now applying the moral reasoning of the Supreme Court decision in the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* sodomy case. Similarly, a committed sexual relationship between a man and his mother, or between two adult siblings, has as much right to marriage as homosexual unions. Incest prohibitions are predicated on the idea that it is inappropriate to validate a sexual merger between two persons who share too much structural sameness (here, of a familial sort through close blood relations). But an approval of *same-sex* intercourse cancels out arguments based on excessive structural similarity. Not even adult-child sex can be completely ruled out of bounds, and much less adult-adolescent sex, since some adults who have had sex as children are asymptomatic in terms of scientifically measurable negative effect.

Second, there is good evidence that societal approval of homosexual practice may **increase the incidence of homosexuality and bisexuality**, not just homosexual practice. We know that: (1) Adolescents experience a much higher rate of sexual orientation uncertainty than adults ([G. Remafedi](#), et al., “Demography of sexual orientation in adolescents,” *Pediatrics* 89:4 [Apr. 1992]: 714-21). (2) Most self-professed gays and lesbians and some heterosexuals experience one or more shifts on the 0-6 Kinsey spectrum in the course of life. (3) Geographical (rural vs. urban) and educational variables have a profound effect on the incidence of homosexual self-identification. (4) Those who self-identify as gay or lesbian are several times more likely to have experienced sex at an early age than those who self-identify as heterosexual. (5) A 2001 study by University of California professors [Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz](#) reported that children of homosexual couples were “more likely to be open to homoerotic relationships” (“[How] Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?”, *American Sociological Review* 66:2 [Apr. 2001]: 159-83, quote from p. 176). (6) There are instances of significant cross-cultural differences, ancient and modern, regarding the incidence and shape of homosexual practice. (7) The best identical twin studies indicate that the large majority of identical twin pairs where at least one twin identifies as non-heterosexual do not show a concordance match in the co-twin (i.e., the co-twin identifies as heterosexual). See further *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 395-429. Given these considerations, it would not be surprising if the significant increase in homosexual activity reported for both the United States and Britain over the past decade or two were attributable, in part, to an increase in homosexuality and bisexuality. Since the homosexual life is characterized by a comparatively high rate of problems in terms of sexually transmitted disease, mental health issues, nonmonogamous behavior, and short-term unions—even in homosex-affirming areas of the world—an increase in homosexuality and bisexuality will mean more persons affected by such problems.

Third, “gay marriage,” as the ultimate legal sanctioning of homosexual behavior, will bring with it **a wave of intolerance toward, and attack on the**

Arguing that we should grant marriage status to homosexually inclined persons to avert promiscuity is like insisting that we grant marriage status to adult incestuous or polygamous unions to promote relational longevity.

civil liberties of, those who publicly express disapproval of homosexual practice (see Alan Sears and Craig Osten, *The Homosexual Agenda*). The latter will be regarded, legally and morally, as the equivalent of virulent racists. In the civil sphere, they will see their, and their children's, educational opportunities, gainful employment, and even freedom from incarceration put at increasing risk. Christian colleges and seminaries will risk losing their tax-exempt status, access to federal grants and student loans, and ultimately accreditation itself. Public schools will intensify their indoctrination of children into the acceptability of homosexual unions and single out for ridicule any who question this agenda—from kindergarten on. Parents' rights in instilling moral values in their children will be abridged. Indeed, the state could remove self-professed gay and lesbian children from parents who express moral disapproval of homosexual practice on the pretense of "child abuse." Mainline denominations will comply with societal trends by refusing to ordain "heterosexists" and disciplining heterosexual clergy and ostracizing heterosexual members. Since approval of homosexual practice can only occur at the cost of marginalizing Scripture, the trend will be toward a hard-left radicalization of mainline denominations.

Conclusion

In sum, why is "gay marriage" wrong? Most importantly, the idea of "gay marriage" is an oxymoron and a rejection of a core value in Judeo-Christian sexual ethics. Marriage requires the two sexes to reconstitute a sexual whole. By definition same-sex erotic attraction is predicated either on the narcissism of being attracted to what one is as a sexual being or on the delusion that one needs to merge with another of the same sex to complete one's own sexual deficiencies. Arguing that we should grant marriage status to homosexually inclined persons to avert promiscuity is like insisting that we grant marriage status to adult incestuous or polygamous unions to promote relational longevity. It doesn't address the main problem with this particular kind of sexual immorality.

But "gay marriage" is also wrong because it will more likely weaken the institution of marriage than moderate the typical excesses of homosexual behavior. The dominant rhetoric of "gay marriage" severs marriage from childbearing and, not surprisingly, leads to more out-of-wedlock births in the population as a whole. The fact that relatively few homosexual couples will get married precludes from the outset any major positive impact on homosexual behavior. Those that do get married will still experience extraordinarily high rates of outside sex partners and divorce, owing to the absence of complementary male-female dynamics. The result will be a further devaluation of monogamy and permanence for the institution of marriage.

Finally, "gay marriage" will bring about the ultimate demise of structural prerequisites for marriage (for example, as regards "plural unions" and adult incest) by making affection the ultimate trump card; increase the incidence of bisexuality and homosexuality in the population and thereby expose more young persons to their negative side-effects for health; and lead to the radical abridgement of the civil and religious liberties of our children, to the point of

prosecuting any public expressions of misgivings regarding the active promotion of homosexual practice.

*Dr. Robert A. J. Gagnon is Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon, 2001), and co-author, with Dan Via, of *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003).*

© 2004 Robert A. J. Gagnon