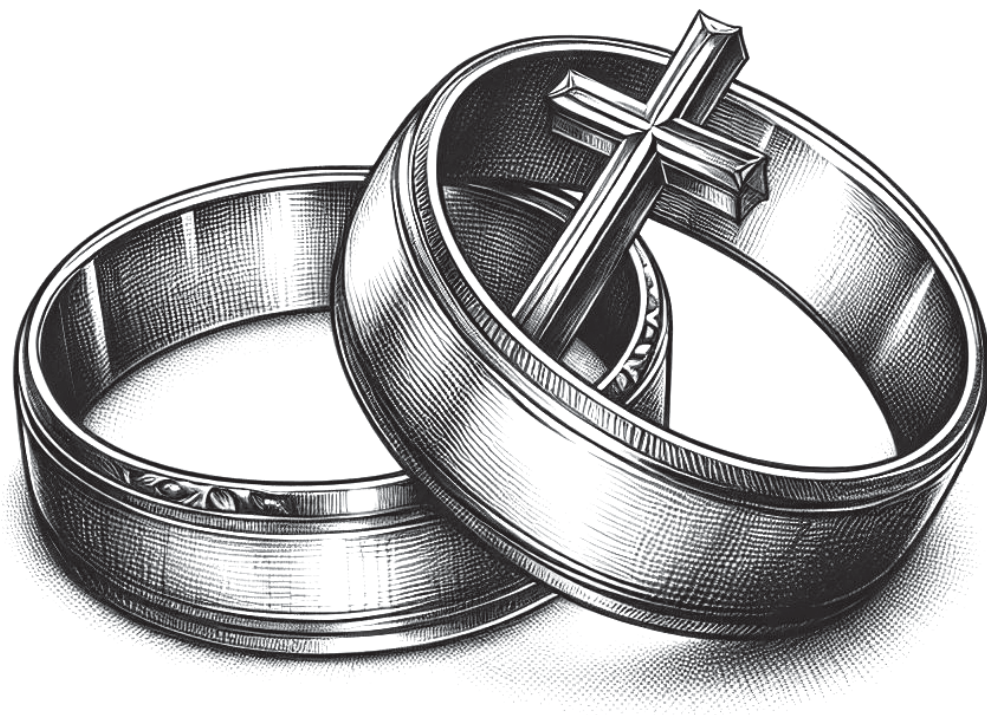


A SHORT BIBLE STUDY SUPPORTING SAME-SEX CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE



INTRODUCTION

Many Christians today have become convinced that God approves of Christian marriage between two men or two women. That is, a committed, monogamous, and loving same-sex marriage intended to last a lifetime. Not sexual promiscuity. This study looks at the Biblical passages that support this belief.

To understand the Bible's teachings on Christian faithfulness, we need to think about the specific context. Certain Biblical commands are for all Christians, regardless of time or place. But some, even though they may sound universal, only apply to specific situations.

Let's look at some biblical instructions that many churches believe don't apply today. They were important for the specific circumstances at the time they were made, but they aren't universal. Then we'll look at the texts on same-sex relationships.

BIBLICAL COMMANDS THAT MANY CHRISTIANS BELIEVE DO NOT APPLY TODAY

No women in church leadership

"I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man. She is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Tim. 2:11-14). "Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says. . . For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached? . . . What I am writing is the Lord's command" (1 Cor. 14:34-38).

The Apostle Paul supports his apparently universal command with strong Biblical reasoning. Despite this instruction, many churches have women pastors and elders. These positions involve congregational oversight and authoritative teaching. Such churches do not believe that Paul's instruction, as plain as it seems, applies to them. We believe it was made for a certain society and time, not for everyone all the time and everywhere.

No remarriage after divorce

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12). "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits

adultery" (Luke 16:18). ". . . I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery . . ." (Matt. 19:1-12).

"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

Both Jesus and Paul speak against remarriage after divorce. Only Matthew's Gospel gives an exception for 'sexual immorality.' This exception may refer to infidelity during the ancient Jewish engagement period. If so, there is no adultery exception for Christian couples. The Catholic Church prohibits remarriage after a divorce, even in cases of adultery.

Some churches interpret "sexual immorality" as adultery. They allow the non-adulterous partner to remarry. The Eastern Orthodox Churches allow remarriage after divorce for adultery and desertion. Leaders during the Protestant Reformation variously permitted remarriage after divorce. This was allowed for adultery, impotency, desertion, insanity, danger to life, and refusal of marital relations. Many churches now let divorced people remarry based on the pastor's judgement in the circumstances.

Women must wear head-coverings during church services

"Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair

cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. . . Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? . . . If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.” (1 Cor. 11:1-16).

Paul commanded women to wear head-coverings in church services. He uses creation and heavenly realities to support his demand. He also dismisses counterarguments and states that all the churches require head-coverings.

Yet most churches today don't require women to wear headscarves or hats. We do not believe that this authoritative command applies to our time and place. Why not? Because of the cultural context. Women in both the Jewish and Roman societies wore scarf-like coverings in public. Some Christian women in the city of Corinth were removing these head coverings during worship. This went against customary practice. It challenged the patriarchal culture and embarrassed husbands. It would have caused a scandal and harmed the message of the Gospel.

This is different from our situation. Women in Western society usually don't wear hats in public anymore. Head-coverings no longer have symbolic importance. Paul's instruction about head-coverings, important in Paul's era, isn't relevant today.

Slavery is acceptable and enslavers deserve respect

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ" (Eph. 6:5).

The Bible accepts slavery and tells slaves to obey and respect their enslavers. But modern Christians believe that slavery is a great evil. During American slavery, enslaved persons, many of whom were Christians, disobeyed their enslavers by escaping. And other Christians helped them escape to the North. They did not believe the Bible's instruction applied to them. Today we praise them for doing God's will. If any Christians now tried to support slavery using the Bible, they would be condemned. Even though the Bible is clear, Christians don't think it supports slavery today.

Male "headship" in marriage

"Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" (Eph. 5:22-23). "But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3).

These instructions on the authority of men within the family may seem to be universal. But many scholars think their aim was to help believers spread the Gospel more effectively within their own culture. Doing that required showing respect for the existing social structures. This was not an endorsement of those structures as God's universal will. While respecting the traditional norms, the Apostles also sought to bring more equality. We see this, for example, in the Ephesians 5 teaching about mutual submission of husband and wife.

Promoting hierarchical male authority in our egalitarian society goes against the existing norms. It harms the Gospel's testimony. It goes against the Scripture's intent: to help spread the Gospel by showing respect for customary practices. To honor this teaching in our own culture, Christians do well to embrace equality in marriage. Making decisions together as partners is the better witness.

No lending money at interest

"He lends at interest and takes a profit. Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he is to be put to death; his blood will be on his own head" (Ezekiel 18:13). "And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back" (Luke 6:34-35)

The Old Testament prohibits charging interest on loans. In the New Testament, Jesus intensifies this command. For fifteen hundred years Christian teaching prohibited lending money with interest. Protestant churches ended this ban in the 16th century with the rise of capitalism in Europe. Today, churches think that the Bible's ban on charging interest depended on certain society conditions.

Jewelry, lawsuits and holy kisses

Many churches today dismiss other authoritative instructions as no longer relevant. One example is Christian women not to wear jewelry (1 Timothy 2:9,10). Another is Christians

never to sue each other in court (1 Cor. 6:1-7). Also, Christians should greet each other with a "holy kiss" (Romans 16:16, 2 Corinthians 13:12; etc.).

PASSAGES ON SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

Like the examples above, Scriptures that condemn same-sex sexual relationships focus on specific actions and situations. They do not relate to Christian same-sex marriages today.

Romans 1:21-32

The Apostle Paul is writing to show that all human beings – Jews and Gentiles – are guilty of sin and need a Savior. His summary of Gentile sins includes same-sex behavior. Paul condemns same-sex sexual relations linked to idolatry, unbridled lust, and rampant immorality. The picture is an ugly one of wholesale human depravity.

This describes some same-sex behavior today. But it is not like a faithful Christian marriage between two men or two women. Christian same-sex marriages are not connected to idolatry, unbridled lust, or rampant immorality. Couples in these marriages typically exhibit mutual self-giving love, not selfish lust. They are monogamous and faithful. The marriage partners are not involved in immoral promiscuity. Just like many other Christians, they are committed to faithfully following Jesus. Their relationship bears no resemblance to behavior described in the Romans 1 passage. Romans 1 doesn't appear to be talking about them.

Paul describes the same-sex activity he condemns as "unnatural," or "against nature." But this doesn't seem to mean "contrary to God's creation." Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11 that men having long hair also is "unnatural." Yet, in

the Old Testament, God sometimes commanded long hair. Also, long hair on men is common in many cultures. If “against nature” doesn’t mean “against creation” then what is unnatural in some same-sex relationships may depend on the type of relationship and the culture. As it does for men wearing long hair.

1st Corinthians 6:9

This verse in the *New International Version (NIV)* says that “men who have sex with men” will not inherit God’s Kingdom. However, an *NIV* footnote reads, “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.”

There was a common social pattern in Roman same-sex sexual relationships. They typically involved a married, heterosexual man. He was the “active” partner in a same-sex extramarital affair. The passive partner was a younger male, who was usually a slave or a prostitute. Read according to its plain meaning, 1 Cor. 6 is condemning this kind of unequal, exploitive same-sex practice. The *NIV* main text generalizes to refer to all same-sex sexual behavior. But that’s only its interpretation, not an actual translation of Paul’s words.

Today’s Christian same-sex marriages differ greatly from the Roman active-passive role divisions. They are typically characterized by equality and mutuality. Like heterosexual marriages today, roles can vary and depend on each person’s personality. 1 Corinthians 6:11 isn’t describing today’s Christian same-sex marriage.

1 Timothy 1:10

Some Christians think this passage criticizes all same-sex sexual relationships. But the Greek words used imply something different, as in 1 Corinthians 6. They refer to a relationship

between an older man and a young male slave or prostitute. A word meaning “kidnappers” or “slave dealers” comes after these two words. In ancient Rome, slave traders would kidnap young boys. They would castrate them and make them work as prostitutes. These three Greek words used in conjunction suggest that Paul is condemning this horrific practice. Same-sex Christian marriage today is very different.

Jude 7

This text talks about how God punished Sodom and Gomorrah for sexual immorality. It says, literally, that they “went after other flesh.” The meaning of the phrase is uncertain. But Jude seems to criticize the men of Sodom for trying to have sex with angels (Genesis 19:1-5). In verse 6 Jude refers to the angels who “deserted their proper dwelling.” This comes from Genesis 6:2-3, which talks about fallen angels having sex with human women. Verse 7 starts by saying “Likewise.” This suggests Jude is talking about similar behavior: humans having sex with angels. In any case, this passage is too obscure to apply to Christians in a same-sex marriage today, who are nothing like the people Jude condemns.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Two verses in the Old Testament condemn same-sex relations. The cultural gap between our society and the Old Testament is immense. Some scholars believe that the Law of Moses condemned same-sex sexual activity because it was associated with idol worship and prostitution. It was also considered debasing for a man to take a woman’s sexual role. These concerns don’t seem relevant to Christian same-sex marriage today.

Many commands in the Old Testament behavior codes no longer apply to God’s community in Christ. For example, God commanded war and ordered the killing of whole families (Deuteronomy 20:16-18). The Law of

Moses said children who cursed or hit their parents, or repeatedly disobeyed them, must be put to death (Exodus 21:15, 17; Deuteronomy 21:18-21). The Law also said not to mix different materials in clothes or plant different seeds in one field (Leviticus 19:19).

Genesis 1 and 2

‘These chapters tell the story of God’s creation of the world. They describe marriage between a man and a woman as God’s design for populating the earth. But they don’t say that heterosexual marriage is God’s exclusive will.

Jesus uses this account to explain why he prohibits remarriage after divorce. He says God meant for marriages to last a lifetime. However, Jesus and later church teaching provide exceptions. Likewise, the Genesis account may suggest that heterosexual marriage was God’s original intent. Even so, if exceptions exist to life-long marriage, then there may also be exceptions allowing for same-sex marriage.

Some Christians acknowledge the historical context of Biblical teachings on divorce, slavery, and women pastors. They believe that these instructions can be revised. But they treat same-sex marriage differently. Certainly, each revision must be evaluated on its own terms. But if we single out opposing same-sex marriage, we may be unjustifiably differentiating it from other issues.

BIBLICAL TEACHING THAT SUPPORTS CHRISTIAN SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

The purpose of marriage in the New Testament:

Ephesians 5:21-33

Christian marriage reflects the mutual self-giving love between Christ and the church. This text focuses on a marriage between a man and a woman. But the underlying truth also applies to a Christian same-sex marriage. Such a marriage can mirror the love between Christ and the church. It can embody sacrificial love, monogamy, and permanency. It can also show Jesus’ character to others. It can lead to fruitful Christian service in the world. Many Christian same-sex marriages today express this reality.

1 Corinthians 7

In these verses, Paul advises unmarried people to marry if they struggle with controlling their desires. Marriage can help prevent promiscuity and sexual frustration. Paul recognizes that not everyone has the gift of celibacy. This advice is relevant for Christians who may choose to marry a same-sex partner to fulfill their sexual needs and avoid promiscuity.

The New Testament views marriage differently than the Old Testament. Marrying and having children is not a divine mandate. Paul advises against marrying, saying it can distract from God’s mission and will bring trouble. In God’s coming Kingdom people won’t marry. Marriage is a commitment only meant for this current age. It is not an enduring part of God’s new creation.

The witness of the Holy Spirit

John 16:13, Acts 10,11,15

Jesus said, “when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Peter shared the Gospel with Cornelius, a Gentile who was not circumcised. The Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius. Upon seeing the evidence of the

Spirit, Peter baptized him. He did this despite the Old Testament command that circumcision was “an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:9-14).

Later, the Council of apostles and elders in Jerusalem heard Peter’s testimony. Paul and Barnabas told about the many uncircumcised Gentiles who had accepted Jesus and received the Holy Spirit. This helped the apostles understand the Scriptures in a new way. They decided that Gentile believers in Jesus would not have to be circumcised. This set aside an “everlasting” command of God.

We see in Acts that the Holy Spirit often runs ahead of the churches’ formal decision-making. First came the Holy Spirit baptism of Cornelius and the appearance of churches with many Gentile members. Later, the Jerusalem Council carefully considered the matter and made a final decision.

Many Christians in same-sex marriages show the Holy Spirit’s presence and power in their lives. This is important evidence. Getting to know Christians married to a same-sex partner can be eye-opening. We see that their lives are no different than married heterosexual Christians. We are like Peter, who saw the Holy Spirit fall on Cornelius and said, “How could I oppose God and refuse baptism.” Likewise, we shouldn’t deny the obvious presence of God’s Spirit in the lives of these Christians. We should be welcoming and affirming, as Peter welcomed Cornelius. This doesn’t mean we reject Scripture. Rather, we see the Scriptures in a new way, like the apostles did.

WHAT ABOUT CHURCH TRADITION?

Churches traditionally saw same-sex sexual activity as sinful until recently. Yet, throughout history, churches have revised their understanding and teachings from Scripture. Here are some examples:

- In the 1st century, the Apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem changed their beliefs. They included uncircumcised Gentiles as full church members. This was contrary to their previous interpretation of Scripture. It was a huge change from Israel’s history of requiring circumcision for being part of God’s covenant people.
- Protestant leaders and churches in the 16th century changed a doctrine that had been around for fifteen hundred years. They allowed remarriage after divorce for adultery, desertion and other reasons. They embraced a fresh interpretation of Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings.
- In the 16th century, Protestants started letting people lend money with interest. This reversed a teaching that had been in place for fifteen hundred years.
- In the 1800s, churches in England and the Northern United States, and later worldwide, condemned slavery as a great evil. This reversed church teaching that had supported slavery for almost two thousand years. The New Testament told slaves to obey their masters. Christians discarded this teaching.
- During the 20th century churches started affirming women as pastors and church leaders. This action overturned almost two thousand years of church teaching. It happened even though the Bible says women can’t hold these positions.
- In the 1950s, churches started allowing women to be in church services without wearing hats. This set aside almost two thousand years of church practice. This change happened even though the Bible says women must cover their heads when worshiping.
- In the late 20th century, Catholic and Protestant churches began opposing the death penalty in all cases. For almost two thousand years, Christian teaching had supported it.

These changes to church doctrine were as big as allowing same-sex Christian marriages. They involve new ways of looking at Scripture. They arose from a better understanding of words in the Bible, historical settings, and cultural contexts. And from the need to deal with new situations not mentioned in Scripture.

This is how church teachings should be – open to change as guided by the Holy Spirit. It makes sense for churches today to rethink how they see Scripture on marriages between two men or two women. This fits with how God has guided churches throughout history.

DISCERNMENT BY THE CHURCHES

Church members together decide about making changes to Christian teaching. Jesus told his disciples that they had the power to discern God’s will. He called this “binding and loosing.” In Jesus’ time, “bind” meant to forbid something, and “loose” meant to allow it. Jesus gave his followers this authority (Matthew 16:19; 18:18-20).

The Bible isn’t a rulebook for every possible circumstance. By authorizing binding and loosing, Jesus affirms that it will not always be clear whether a given action in a specific context is a sin or not. The gathered believers will have to make a Holy Spirit-guided judgment about God’s will. This is Jesus’ provision for us in times of disagreement and uncertainty.

Acts 15 provides an example. The Apostles

and elders learned that uncircumcised Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. They had a special meeting to decide if this was God’s will. They prayed, talked together, related their experiences, and discussed relevant passages of Scripture. Afterwards they reached a decision and were able to say: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” (Acts 15:28).

Churches today do well to seek God’s will together on same-sex marriage.

FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS

Major changes in how we understand the Bible and what churches teach might tempt us to doubt our faith. But it need not do that. Jesus himself is the focus and foundation of our faith. We know Jesus and can trust in him. The Spirit of God confirms Jesus to us deep inside, “God’s Spirit bearing witness to our spirit” (Romans 8:16).

Jesus himself is our rock-solid foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11). He is our Lord and Savior (Romans 10:9-11), who died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Jesus himself is “our wisdom, and righteousness, and holiness and salvation” (1 Corinthians 1:30-31). The work God requires is to believe in Jesus (John 6:29). It is Jesus who we love and trust and follow.

We won’t know everything about God’s will, for “we know in part,” and much is puzzling (1 Cor. 13:12). But we know Jesus. As we focus on Jesus and seek to follow him, learning to love as he loves, he will guide us and protect us. Jesus will hold us fast in his eternal love.

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