

## Would I minister at a same-sex wedding?

Would I, a baptist minister in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, minister at a same-sex wedding? To answer simply: “**Yes**”. But like many Christians, I have had some big questions about same-sex marriage over the years. I realise that not everyone in my church will have had the same questions. For some, the matter is straightforward: God loves same-sex couples. God loves marriage. Therefore, God loves same-sex marriage. I would not want to undermine that conclusion or suggest that the Holy Spirit has not led a person to that end-point. But I haven’t taken such a direct route. I have taken a more scenic route through questions such as ‘can Christian marriage change?’, ‘what about the Bible?’, and ‘what about procreation?’ If you’ve had similar questions, you might want to carry on reading for a brief account of where I’m at today.

### 1) Can Christian marriage change?

Until very recently, Christianity has recognised no other kind of marriage than the union of a man and a woman. This is still the traditional and mainstream understanding of Christian marriage throughout the world today. Can Christian marriage change so that it can be extended to same-sex couples? Who are we to tamper with such an enduring institution?

It is one thing to note that marriage is enduring and another to assume that it is unchanging. Like many Christians, I used to regard Christian marriage as unchanging - as unchanging as God is. I idealised marriage, even idolised it! So naturally, I was surprised to find that marriage has changed...a lot. The theologian, Dr Adrian Thatcher, describes it this way:

Within the Christian era, there have been deep changes regarding how [marriage] is entered and at what age; whether and how it may be exited; whether it is open to clergy; whether it is a sacrament; and what, if anything, it signifies in the human relation to God.<sup>1</sup>

Adrian Thatcher also notes the major shift from hierarchical marriage to egalitarian (equal) marriage. Today, it is common to regard marriage as a partnership of equals in a way that would have been unfamiliar to our ancestors; few brides today follow the *Book of Common Prayer* in promising to ‘obey’ their husbands in their wedding vows. This wider change in social attitude has helped us in the Church to see the parts of the Bible that champion equality or show a trajectory toward equality in their context. Many Christians now read the hierarchical passages of scripture about marriage in the light of the more egalitarian passages. At my wedding, I made the same vows as Jenny, my wife. The idea that she would promise something extra, to obey me, for example, seems to me to go against the grain of what marriage is. Yet, I realise several women in my congregation promised to obey their husbands many years ago, and I am aware of women my age who have promised something

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Thatcher, ‘In Favour of ‘Equal Marriage’’ p5

Accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2020 at the following URL: [http://inclusive-](http://inclusive-church.org/sites/default/files/files/In%20Favour%20of%20'Equal%20Marriage'%20Adrian%20Thatcher.pdf)

[church.org/sites/default/files/files/In%20Favour%20of%20'Equal%20Marriage'%20Adrian%20Thatcher.pdf](http://inclusive-church.org/sites/default/files/files/In%20Favour%20of%20'Equal%20Marriage'%20Adrian%20Thatcher.pdf)

similar because of their conviction or their church's teachings on marriage. Still, for most married couples equality is a given.

Which shift is greater: from hierarchical to egalitarian Christian marriage or from heterosexual Christian marriage *only* to heterosexual *and* same-sex Christian marriage? Perhaps we've already made the greatest shift. One might say that in terms of its character, egalitarian heterosexual marriage has more in common with egalitarian same-sex marriage than its hierarchical predecessor. Today, I would sooner minister at the wedding of an egalitarian same-sex marriage than a hierarchical heterosexual marriage where only the bride promises to obey. For me, the equality of the partners' covenant relationship is more important than the sexual differentiation of the partners. You may disagree, but why? Perhaps it is because of your understanding of the Bible or because you believe every marriage should be open to procreation. We will look at these areas next.

## **2) What about the Bible?**

In this section, I will not go through the six or seven passages that have commonly been used to condemn same-sex sexual relations. Mike Parker (Sr. Minister, WBCh) and I preached on these passages back in October 2018 ([www.wbch.org.uk/october-series](http://www.wbch.org.uk/october-series)). These sermons weren't perfect but they reflected the best we could do at the time. We sought to look at the passages in their context and ask whether the behaviour being described in these passages was the same as the sexual relations of loving, equal, and faithful same-sex couples today. On examination, it was far from clear that the biblical authors were talking about what we know today as homosexuality. Some would call our interpretation of the texts 'revisionist' – the idea being that we were revising the traditional interpretations. But, perhaps the translation of first-century words like *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* with the late-19<sup>th</sup> century English word 'homosexuality' was somewhat revisionist in the first place. For some time now, we have been reading into those texts modern ideas about sexuality unfamiliar to the biblical authors. This is a vast conversation, so if you would like to take a closer look at the relevant biblical texts with the help of a leading scholar in the field, I warmly recommend Rev'd Dr Jonathan Tallon's videos on his website: [www.bibleandhomosexuality.org](http://www.bibleandhomosexuality.org)

Surprisingly, I genuinely enjoyed preparing to preach back in October, 2018. I loved the challenge of preaching those passages in a way that didn't condemn a handful of people but instead challenged the whole congregation and proclaimed good news about the grace of God in Christ from these texts. Many preachers have seldom touched these texts in decades. Those that have braved them, often preach awkward, sorrowful sermons that major not on God's action but on human effort. So, when I came to preach on these passages, I was asking God to speak a life-giving word for our whole congregation through each sermon. My prayer was that we would encounter the love of God and consequently grow in love through the reading and preaching of these passages.

Putting that sermon series aside, a key question when we read those six or seven biblical passages, and indeed any biblical text, is: how is God leading us further into love through this text? The tragic reality is that the church's reading of these texts has often led to severe harm to LGBT+ people: I think of the young Christian who hasn't told her Christian parents about her sexuality because she knows that it would irreparably damage their relationship. I think of the minister who pastored and preached with extraordinary love and gifting but was dismissed from his position when he came out to his congregation. I think of LGBT+ people around the world who are imprisoned and/or executed by their so-called Christian (and Muslim) states for same-sex sexual relations.<sup>2</sup> If our reading of the Bible is not leading us into an encounter with divine love and forming us for loving action, are we reading the Bible well? And indeed, if same-sex couples are encountering God's love and growing in love in the context of their relationship, as many are, shouldn't this influence the way we interpret and apply scripture?

I once spoke to a minister who wanted to be affirming of LGBT+ people, and presumably same-sex marriage but was unable to take that step because he could not find anything positive in the Bible about same-sex relationships. He understood the Bible's principles and pastoral guidance to be more affirming of slaves and women than the wider culture at the time but saw no such relative affirmation for same-sex relationships. I can understand that argument, but there are many things that we do today that are not explicitly affirmed in the Bible. A good example, linked to my next section, is contraception. The Bible knows nothing of what we call contraception today. Some might appeal to the command 'be fruitful and increase in number' (Gen. 1:28) or the story of Onan condemned for 'spilling his seed' (Gen. 38:9), but to form a thoughtful ethical position on contraception we have to ask: must all sex be procreative or, at least, open to procreation? This question is relevant to our discussion of same-sex marriage because the procreation of children is not a direct result of a same-sex couple's sexual union. So, we turn now to the topic of procreation.

### **3. What about procreation?**

For many Christians, marriage can never be anything other than the union of one man and one woman because of their reading of the first few chapters of Genesis. This has been summed up with the coarse saying 'God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve'. But, I am surprised when the person who holds this position (which was me many years ago!) is not more interested in the topic of procreation. The sexual differentiation of partners and procreation go hand in hand in the Bible:

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT\\_rights\\_by\\_country\\_or\\_territory#Global\\_LGBT\\_rights\\_maps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_by_country_or_territory#Global_LGBT_rights_maps) - Accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2021.

God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it...' (Genesis 1:27-28a)

Procreation was so important to some of the heroes of the faith like Abraham that it was prioritised over monogamy - and relational chaos ensued. (Genesis 16:1-16). I am not saying Abraham (or Abram back then) was right to take Hagar as a second wife; I'm just using this to illustrate how important procreation was in marriage in ancient times.

Since Augustine, Christianity has traditionally regarded procreation as one of the three 'goods' of marriage: *proles* (offspring), *fides* (faithfulness), and *sacramentum* (the bond of permanence). By procreation, we mean a couple's *openness* to having children as a direct result of their sexual union even if infertility might prevent this intention from being realised. Augustine's understanding of the 'goods' of marriage came from his reading of Genesis. Like Augustine, Jesus also looked back to Genesis when he spoke about marriage in the context of his teaching on divorce (Mark 10:1-12; Matt. 19:1-12). However, Jesus didn't prescribe marriage for all people, he spoke of those who, for various reasons, would not procreate: 'For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.' (Matt. 19:12) After Jesus spoke these words he welcomed the little children, perhaps to show that one can and must welcome, pray for and bless children even if one does not procreate (Matt. 19:13-15). So, Jesus looks back to Genesis but also looks forward to the kingdom of heaven as a possible reason why people might not marry and procreate but rather 'choose to live like eunuchs'.

At another time, when quizzed on marriage in the resurrection, Jesus teaches that marriage (and procreation) won't be necessary at the resurrection:

Jesus replied, 'The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. (Luke 20:34-36; cf. Matt. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27).

Professor Robert Song in his book *Covenant and Calling* suggests that the reason Jesus does not picture marriage in the resurrection is that there will be no death, and thus no need to procreate.<sup>3</sup> Throughout Christian history, celibacy, like that of Jesus and Paul, has been a way of witnessing to this eternal life in the resurrection. In the New Testament, marriage is no longer virtually inevitable, but nor is it completely abandoned. Marriage and procreation continue to find a place alongside celibacy as an acceptable way of living and growing in holiness for a Christian. At the risk of oversimplification, we might say the calling and gift of marriage points back to the goodness of creation and the calling and gift of celibacy points forward to the new creation. But must there forever be only two callings?

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling*, (London: SCM Press, 2014), 15.

Robert Song proposes a third option alongside marriage and celibacy: ‘covenant partnership’. A covenant partnership would be a faithful and permanent relationship like procreative marriage but it would not be open to procreation. Rather, such a relationship would be fruitful in other ways which may or may not involve the bringing up of children. Such partnerships could be between opposite-sex or same-sex partners and like celibacy, they would point forward to life in the resurrection. Any sex within such a partnership would not witness to the close connection between sexual differentiation and procreation established in Genesis but witness to an eternity of human-divine intimacy and communion pictured in Revelation.

Of course, churches already marry couples who do not intend to procreate. So perhaps it might be confusing to introduce ‘covenant partnership’ as an option alongside marriage. Another option, Song argues, would be to allow the theology of ‘covenant partnership’ to reshape our understanding of marriage so that procreation is not a must but a ‘contingent result of marriage’.<sup>4</sup> If marriage is rethought in this way, then the most important thing is not that marriage points back to creation but that it points forward to the new creation. All such marriages would be faithful, permanent, and fruitful – and some would be fruitful through procreation. But since there are many ways of being fruitful besides procreation as a direct result of one’s sexual relationship, marriages could be opposite-sex or same-sex. This last section has leaned heavily on the work of Robert Song, and I regret that my summary may have not done justice to the brilliance of his work. Therefore, I’d strongly recommend reading his book for yourself if you are intrigued by what I have sought to relay above. For many, it will appear strange that this section on procreation is the longest. The reason for this is that most resistance to same-sex marriage in the Church is grounded in a strong attachment to the male-female pairing *for procreation* found in Genesis. But the Bible doesn’t end with Genesis, so we must look to Jesus Christ and to the new creation that has begun in him and allow that to shape how we understand Christian marriage.

### *Conclusion*

I don’t presume this piece of writing will have changed anyone’s mind but I hope it has made my position more intelligible and given the reader something to think about. So, yes, I would love to minister at a same-sex wedding, especially if the couple were partnering as equals for the sake of growing in love and witnessing to an eternity of love and intimacy with God. Why wouldn’t I want to help such a couple make vows to one another? Why wouldn’t I want them to experience something like what I have shared with my wife? Why shouldn’t we celebrate such a covenant in a church building and ask God to bless it?

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<sup>4</sup> Song, *Covenant and Calling*, 89.