

God, what's your stance on same sex marriage?

Every now and then when chatting to another pastor you hear about a problem that is going down in their church and then I ask how did it start and they tell me they did this, or said that, and I am thinking you did what? Why would you do that? Doing that is asking for trouble! I fear I am going to be having that same conversation with a fellow pastor soon and they will be saying to me "you preached on Gay marriage, why would you do that? Are you stupid???"

A month or so ago we told you we were going to do a series called 'God, I've got a question?' We live in a world where there is so much misunderstanding about God, the Church or Christianity in general. So Matt, David and I thought let's give people the opportunity to ask questions – especially questions their unchurched friends might ask, and here we are now ready and eager to tackle the first question.

And chances are this is the most common question being asked of God around the western world today; **God, what's your stance on same sex marriage?**

I am going to try and respond to that question. I am not bold enough to say my message is saying, 'thus saith the Lord' and imply that I am speaking for God on this issue, but I do want to share a bit of the breadth of belief within the wider Christian family.

We have seen a huge and rapid shift on the acceptance of homosexuality in society in the past 10-20 years. An American magazine ran a cover story last year called, "So Far, So Fast". According to them, 60% of all Americans have no problems with same-sex relations and 73% of 18-29 year-olds are in favour of gay marriage and those without religious affiliation 85%. And that is in the states which generally speaking is more conservative in this area than NZers.

But we as Christians are called to follow God, not societal trends. So God, what's your stance on same sex marriage? – Let's pray!

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending the Lord Jesus to be our Saviour and for dying for us on the cross and paying the price for our sins. Thank You for giving us the Word of God that reveals Your plan of redemption and thank You for sending the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into all truth.

I pray Lord that You would give us a deeper understanding of Your Word. I pray that as we read and study the scripture that we can understand all that You would teach us, that we would live in a

way that is honouring to You and that we would draw closer to You each day.

Lord may we see You more clearly and love you more dearly in Jesus name I pray, Amen

It's complex!

Occasionally I hear someone comment, when talking about same sex marriage, "it's simple, the bible is clear it is wrong, so it is wrong." Others say, "Jesus says love one another, don't judge – it's simple."

I want to say "It's not simple!" The issues we face today are serious and they are complex. Not only is it complex for individuals to work through, it's complex for families, and maybe even more complex for Church families. The churches unity is being tested at present.

It's not as simple as pulling out a few random scriptures or saying God loves everyone.

- As we consider this issue we need to look at the whole breadth of Scripture, yes as well as the individual texts.
- We need to wrestle with both the big principles and the meaning of individual words.
- We need to consider what the instructions meant in the biblical world, and then how they should apply today.
- And we need to consider carefully how we conduct our discussions in a context of the culture we live in, and the mission we are on the share the love of God.

An ancient story speaks into our situation. A group of blind men encountered an elephant for the first time. One felt the tusk, another the trunk, another the side, and yet another the tail. From their discoveries, each told the others what an elephant was like: a wall, a tree-trunk, a rope etc. This story gives rise to the question: did each alone have a full understanding of the elephant?

We need to approach the current issues with sincere humility, not having full knowledge, and willing to genuinely listen to one another.

So what does the bible say?

This question is unique to Christians, and this is where those debating the issue here in NZ have been misunderstanding each other, those who are not Christian are talking about rights and equality, and fair enough, and Christians have been trying to align those arguments with what the bible says. Some Christians have

argued very simplistically, others, I don't think they have asked this question seriously enough. So let's see what the bible has to say and dig a little deeper than the surface.

First of all we need to be aware that compared to the main beliefs Christians stand for, the Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are at best a half dozen brief references to it in all of Scripture. (Lev 18.22; 20.13; Rom 1.26-28; 1 Cor 6.9-11; 1Tim 1.10; and probably Jude 7)

So right at the beginning let make sure we keep things in perspective, in terms of emphasis, - it is a minor concern—in contrast, for example, to economic injustice and loving your neighbour.

That is not to say that what the Bible does say shouldn't be considered carefully, we need to try to get the emphasis in the right place, not over emphasize fringe issues.

First of all let briefly comment on the Old Testament texts usually cited.

- **GENESIS 19:1—29** The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. The men of Sodom" come pounding on Lot's door, with the intention of raping Lot's two visitors—who, as we readers know, are actually angels. The rape scenario demonstrates the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage relevant to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual behaviour. The fact that Lot was prepared to give up his daughters shows that there are a myriad of other issues going on there.
- **LEVITICUS 18:22, 20:13** Bible scholars say that in considering biblical teaching on homosexual relations, these Old Testament texts should be used with caution. This is because the original purpose cannot be identified with certainty. It is likely they were given in the context of homosexual practice mixed up in the cultic practices of Baal worship; and the prohibitions may partly have been given to provide a sharp boundary against God's people becoming involved in idolatry. This is not to say that the two Old Testament texts have no value, but simply to acknowledge that they have contested value.

In order to see what decisions the early church made about this matter, we must turn to the New Testament.

- **1 COR 6:9-11, 1 TIM 1:10**, The early church seems to consistently adopt the Old Testament's teaching on matters of sexual morality, including

homosexual acts. In 1Cor and 1Tim 1:10, for example, we find homosexuals included in lists of persons who do things unacceptable to God.

Yes there is some debate over the meaning of certain Greek words when Paul gives an illustrative list of the sorts of persons he means: "fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, malakoi, arsenokoitai, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the abusive, robbers." However whatever they might mean Paul gives no evidence that anyone at Corinth was arguing for the acceptance of same-sex erotic activity.

- **ROMANS 1:18—32** The issue of homosexual relations is most fully addressed in Romans 1. Paul discusses homosexual behaviour (both male and female) as an example of the consequence of failing to recognise the one true God, and instead turning to idolatry and lust. In his negative portrayal of homosexual behaviour Paul uses this as an example of the prevalence of a multitude of sins (1.29).

Romans 1:29-30

²⁹Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarrelling, deception, malicious behaviour, and gossip. ³⁰They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents.

We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3.23).

While we might think this makes things pretty clear, let us keep the discussion on homosexuality in proportion. And let us discuss from the perspective of our own brokenness and shortcomings: we (that's us) all fall short, all of us are sinners. We need to remind ourselves that the discussion we are now having is a discussion between fellow-sinners, and also between Christ-followers who have something of God about them—made in the image of God (Gen 1.26).

There is so much more that could be said but we need to keep moving.

From the view of those who support

There are a number of strong bible believing, evangelical Christians who support same sex marriage. It is important that we consider how they come to that view.

Many think Christianity is about a whole lot of rules, thou shalt not this, thou shalt not that, and they judge how Christian a person is by how closely he or she

follow the set of rules. These people assume that rules are the way God displays his will for human life.

As we have hopefully come to understand as we have gone through the Sermon on the Mount, thinking that following Jesus is about following rules is a huge mistake. Sure there is an aspect of obedience to the one we follow and serve, but I am sure we all agree that is not the essence of Christianity.

This truth had been the whole emphasis of Jesus and the New Testament writers – **God’s rules focused on actions are important, but they are always a means, not an end.** As someone said ‘Action-focused commands are ladders we climb in order to push them away, for once you become virtuous, rules are less of a concern.’ ie When we teach young children to say please and thank you, the goal isn’t just please and thank you, it is politeness, it is respect, it is gratefulness.

This is what Jesus was challenging his followers with when he said, *you heard it said that.... But I say...*

In that teaching, Jesus focused extensively on the inner qualities of faithfulness, honesty and love, rejecting the inner vices of anger, lust, fear and judgmentalism. The disciplines Christ offered for the changing of our habits—prayer, fasting and generosity—all target the heart (Mt 6.1-18).

Virtues, character qualities, are the building blocks and descriptions of ‘soul’ health. Virtues are character traits that parallel Christ’s own, that’s what we mean when we talk about living like Jesus (love, patience, courage, faithfulness, wisdom, etc). Without virtues we cannot be moral, we touched on this last week - for “a bad tree cannot bear good fruit” (Mt 7.18). The New Testament invites us to reflect the goodness of God, and God is not good because God follows a set of rules. God is good because of God’s exceptional character (Mt 5:44-48).

So what has that got to do with same sex marriage?

It is argued that nothing about monogamous same-sex relationships contradicts a life of virtue. Physical relationships between same sex individuals may be enjoyed by faithful, courageous, wise, hopeful, loving, grace-filled, self-controlled people. People who bear the fruit of the Spirit.

Because of this, monogamous gay marriage cannot be the target of the New Testament’s prohibitions when speaking about vicious sexual behaviour.

Through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows us the futility of rule-focused ethics, for true righteousness remains a matter of the heart. Cutting off your hand will not cleanse you of lust. To be moral, your inner self must change.

Because the virtuous life—not rule-following—is what matters most to God, we ought to interpret the prohibitions against gay marriage in a similar, character-focused light. We may rightly read a passage like Romans 1 and say: pederasty (man-boy sexual relations), temple prostitution, or using sex to dominate others (arguably what Paul has in the front of his mind when writing about gay sex) are soul-destroying because they cannot arise from love or faithfulness or self-control. But monogamous same-sex marriages are not soul-destroying; faithful, compassionate, Spirit-empowered, Christ-honouring people can enjoy them.

So the conclusion is that committed same-sex relationships should not be injected into our reading of the New Testament passages outlawing vicious sexual behaviour. They simply do not fit.

So you have two perspectives, both claiming to be biblical. It’s complex!

Other Issues of interpretation today

While some of us want to argue, “the text says what the text says” and are hesitant to go beyond the original meaning of a text, however most of us rationalize the text in other issues. Despite clear texts on such things as eating pork and female head coverings, most of us ignore those texts—for good interpretive reasons- and we also struggle with various texts on divorce and remarriage in the context of the realities of our contemporary world.

One contemporary view is that a person’s sexual orientation is an unchosen fact, and it is unrealistic to expect people to remain celibate, and that same sex marriage is therefore a preferred option in avoiding promiscuity. In this argument, the broader biblical principles of love and justice have priority over a handful of texts.

However the traditional view would argue this effectively negates the revealed will of God through the bible. Those with a traditional view would say that it is not loving to support something which is contrary to the mind of God. They would say the norm is found in Genesis 1 and 2, and the most loving approach is to support that which God has revealed in Scripture, believing that ultimately God know best and what will best contribute to the success of both the individual and the wider society.

This is where I am at, the traditional view. Although I am embarrassed by some of the naive and insensitive comments made by some from the traditional view. I accept that there are valid arguments on each side but in the end I believe the texts as they stand reveal God's best.

I am aware of some who would come to a different conclusion to me, some of them friends, and respected and godly leaders and they remain my brothers and

sisters in Christ and I honour the love and sensitivity with which they have come to their view. However I would say that most evangelical theologians still hold the traditional view.

How do we respond?

While we have looked at the theology around same sex marriage, the purpose of this message is not to take a strong position or definitively define matters theologically. Rather, the more important purpose of this message is to help us to think through how to respond as individuals and as a church.

So in this last section I want to present 5 perspectives that I hope are helpful as we think and pray through a way forward.

1. The church has always been counter-cultural

We have been born into a unique season in history. Our culture is moving from a Christian culture to a post-Christian culture right before our eyes. For most of us here the world into which we were born no longer exists. Viewpoints that were widely embraced just decades ago are no longer embraced. For some this seems like progress. For others, it seems like we're losing something.

But is that really such a big deal? For most of the last 2000 years, the church has been counter-cultural, well that is what we have meant to have been. The church was certainly counter-cultural in the first century. And history would say that being counter-cultural usually helps the church more than hurts it.

If you think about it, regardless of your theological position, *all* our views as Christians are counter-cultural and always will be. If our views are cultural, we're probably not reading the scriptures closely enough.

We're at our best when we offer a godly alternative, not just a reflection of a diluted spirituality.

2. It's actually strange to ask non-Christians to hold Christian values

I think most of us would recognise that the majority of New Zealanders would have a post-Christian worldview.

The question Christians, in a post-Christian culture, have to ask themselves is this: *Why would we expect non-Christians to behave like Christians?*

If we believe sex is a gift given by God to be experienced between a man and a woman within marriage, why would you expect people who don't follow Christ to embrace that?

Why would we expect people who don't profess to be Christians to:

- Wait until marriage to have sex?
- Clean up their language?
- Stop getting drunk?
- Be faithful to one person for life?
- Pass laws like the entire nation was Christian?

Seriously? Why?

The key difference today from say 50 years ago is that most people today are not pretending to be Christians, and that in fact is a good thing. So *why* would they adopt Christian values or morals?

Please don't get me wrong.

I'm a *pastor*. I completely believe that *God's way is the best way*.

When you follow biblical teachings about how to live life, your life simply gets better.

I do everything I can to align my life with the teachings of Jesus, and I'm passionate about helping every follower of Christ do the same.

But what's the logic behind judging people who don't follow Jesus for behaving like people who don't follow Jesus?

Why would you hold the world to the same standard you hold the church?

Non-Christians generally act more consistently with their value system than we do. It's difficult for a non-Christian to be a hypocrite because they tend to live out what they believe. Chances are they are better at living out their values than you or I are.

Jesus never blamed pagans for acting like pagans. But he did speak out against religious people for acting hypocritically. We need to dwell on that.

3. We've been dealing with sex outside of traditional marriage for a LONG time

If you believe gay sex is sinful, it's really no morally different than straight sex outside of marriage.

If we are honest, there are plenty of unmarried people in churches around the country having sex. I know we want to believe that's not true (*I want to believe that's not true*), but if you ask around you'll discover that less and less really surrender their sexuality.

Not to mention the married people that struggle with porn, lust and a long list of other dysfunctions.

If we believe gay marriage is not God's design, we're really dealing with the *same* issue we've been dealing with all along—sex outside of its God-given context. We don't need to treat it any differently.

And we may want to start dealing with gluttony and gossip and greed while we're at it.

At least be consistent...

4. The early church never looked to the government for guidance

Having a government that doesn't embrace the church's values line for line actually puts Christians in some great company—the company of the earliest followers of Jesus.

Jesus spent about zero time asking the government to change during his ministry. In fact, people asked him to *become* the government, and he replied that his Kingdom is not of this world.

The Apostle Paul appeared before government officials regularly. Not once did he ask them to change the laws of the land. He did, however, invite government officials to have Jesus personally change them.

None of us in the West are suffering as much as Jesus and Paul suffered at the hands of a government. In fact, our government protects our freedom to gather and even disagree with others. Plus, it gives us *tax breaks* for donations.

We honestly don't have it that hard.

Maybe if it was harder for us, the future church will be more like the early church, rising early, before dawn, to pray, to encourage, to break bread.

Maybe we would pool our possessions and seek justice for the poor, and love and respect our spouses radically and deeply with an unconditional love that will shock the culture. Maybe we would treat others with a self-giving love, and even offer our lives in place of theirs.

Maybe we'd be willing to lose our jobs, our homes, our families and even our lives because we follow Jesus.

That might just touch off a revolution like it did two thousand years ago. Perhaps the government might even take notice, amazed by the love that radical Jesus followers display.

5. Our judgment of the gay community may destroy any potential relationship

Sadly much of the so called Christian reaction has driven a deeper wedge between the Christian church and the Gay community Jesus loves.

Judgment is a terrible evangelism strategy. People don't line up to be judged. If you want to keep being ineffective at reaching unchurched people, keep judging them. Judging outsiders is un-Christian.

Paul told us to stop judging people outside the church. Jesus said God will judge us by the same standard with which we judge others.

Paul also reminds us to drop the superior-attitude; none of us are saved by the good we do, but by grace. Yes we are saved by *grace*. Our sins are simply different than many others. And in many respects, they are the same.

People don't line up to be judged. But they might line up to be loved.

So love people. And work harder with the people with whom you disagree.

Conclusion

Those are a few of the things I've learned and I'm struggling with how to live out.

The thinking process is not easy when culture is changing and people who sincerely love Jesus sincerely disagree.

Despite the conflict both outside and inside the church on this issue, I believe there's more hope for the future than there is despair. The radical ethic of grace and truth found in Jesus is more desperately needed in our world today than ever before.

Is the path crystal clear? No.

But rather than being a setback, perhaps this can move the church yet another step closer to realizing its true mission. That is what living like Jesus, loving without measure, learning our faith and leading to make a difference is all about.

Amen