



Biblical Ethics:

Selected Resources from the ESV Study Bible

Marriage and Sexual Morality - What Is Marriage?

Marriage is the fundamental institution of all human society. It was established by God at creation, when God created the first human beings as “male and female” ([Gen. 1:27](#)) and then said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” ([Gen. 1:28](#)).

Marriage begins with a commitment before God and other people to be husband and wife for life. In [Malachi 2:14](#), marriage is viewed as a “covenant” commitment in which God stands as a “witness.” And Jesus says that a married couple constitutes a unity that “God has joined together” ([Matt. 19:6](#)). Therefore when a marriage occurs, a man and woman have a new status before God: he now considers them to be husband and wife together.

Some kind of public commitment is also necessary to a marriage, for a society must know to treat a couple as married and not as single. Sexual intercourse alone does not constitute a marriage, as was evident from the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria, where he said to her, “For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband” ([John 4:18](#)). She was living with a man but that did not mean she was married to him, for there had been no public commitment recognized by God or by the community (cf. also [Ex. 22:16–17](#)).

Both [Genesis 2:24](#) and [Matthew 19:5](#) view the “one flesh” unity that occurs as an essential part of the marriage. That is why sexual intercourse after a marriage ceremony is often said to “consummate” the marriage, and (except in cases where it is physically impossible, because of disability, injury, or advanced age) it is thought that a marriage has not fully begun until sexual intercourse has occurred.

Marriage is a picture of the covenantal relationship between Christ and the church, with the husband representing the former and the wife representing the latter: “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” ([Eph. 5:32](#)).

Some Will Not Be Married

The Bible also recognizes that not everyone will be married, and even among those who are married some will be widowed or divorced and therefore will become single again. In [1 Corinthians 7:7–40](#), Paul sees advantages to both being single and being married. Jesus himself was never married, and Paul was not married at the time of his ministry (see [1 Cor. 7:7; 9:5](#); it is impossible to know whether he was previously married or not). Jesus and Paul are examples of godly singleness coupled with wonderful effectiveness in ministry. But Paul says, “Each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another” ([1 Cor. 7:7](#)), and therefore both remaining single and becoming married are morally permissible choices depending on the kind of life that God has called each person to live (see [1 Cor. 7:17, 27–28, 36–38](#)).

Polygamy

Why did God allow polygamy in the OT? Nowhere in the Bible did God ever command polygamy or tell anyone to marry more than one wife. Rather, God temporarily allowed polygamy to occur (he did not give any general prohibition against it) without giving it any explicit moral approval. Nevertheless, in the OT narratives, whenever a man has two or more wives, it seems to lead to trouble (see [Genesis 16; 29–31; 1 Samuel 1; 1 Kings 11](#); note the prohibition in [Deut. 17:17](#)). In addition, polygamy is horribly dehumanizing for women, for it does not treat them as equal in value to their husbands, and therefore it does not recognize that they share fully in

the high status of being created “in the image of God” ([Gen. 1:27](#)) and of being worthy of honor as “heirs with you of the grace of life” ([1 Pet. 3:7](#)). The requirement that an elder be “husband of one wife” ([1 Tim. 3:2](#)) would exclude polygamists from being elders (evidence for polygamy among Jews in the 1st century is found in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.14; Mishnah, *Yebamoth* 4.11; *Ketuboth* 10.1, 4, 5; *Sanhedrin* 2.4; *Kerithoth* 3.7; *Kiddushin* 2.7; *Bechoroth* 8.4; and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 134; for polygamy among non-Jews, see *2 Macc.* 4:30; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.19; Tertullian, *Apology* 46). This has practical application today in missionary contexts in cultures where polygamy is still practiced: the Bible would not encourage a husband to divorce any of his multiple wives when this would leave them without support and protection. But it would not allow a man with multiple wives to be an elder. This restriction would provide a pattern that would generally lead to the abolition of polygamy in a church in a generation or two.

Sexual Intimacy and Moral Standards for Marriage

The Bible views sexual intimacy in marriage as a blessing from God. God said to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” ([Gen. 1:28](#)), which implies that God created them so that they would have sexual intercourse together and thereby bear children (cf. [Gen. 1:31](#)). Sex is seen within the context of marriage (“his wife,” [Gen. 2:24](#)) from the very beginning of creation. After the fall, sexual intimacy in marriage is still viewed positively (see [Prov. 5:15–19](#); Song of Solomon; [1 Cor. 7:2–5](#)).

Why is adultery wrong? (1) Because God says it is wrong: “You shall not commit adultery” ([Ex. 20:14](#)). (2) Adultery pictures unfaithfulness in the relationship between Christ and the church, giving a picture of Christ being unfaithful to his people and abandoning them, and not keeping his covenant with them, or else picturing the church as worshiping other gods and being unfaithful to Christ (cf. [Mal. 2:14](#); [Eph. 5:31–32](#)). (3) Adultery intrudes another person into the “one flesh” relationship of marriage (cf. [Gen. 2:24](#); [Eph. 5:31](#)). (4) Adultery destroys trust within a marriage because it is the most serious kind of violation of a marriage vow. (5) Adultery often leads to children being born without two parents to raise them or else leads to abortion to end an unwanted pregnancy, both of which consequences contradict God’s ideal. (6) Adultery is thus frequently and understandably pictured in Scripture as destroying a person’s life: “He does not know that it will cost him his life” ([Prov. 7:23](#); cf. [5:3–14](#); [6:27–29](#), [32–33](#); [7:21–23](#)).

Sexual intercourse between unmarried persons is also consistently viewed as morally wrong throughout Scripture, from the laws of Moses ([Ex. 22:16–17](#); [Deut. 22:13–21](#)) to the teachings of Jesus, who implicitly rebuked the woman at the well for living with someone to whom she was not married ([John 4:16–18](#); cf. also [Gen. 38:24](#); [Matt. 15:19](#) [*porneia* or “sexual immorality” is distinguished from adultery, and the 1st-century understanding of the word would certainly include any sexual intercourse outside of marriage]; [John 8:41](#); [Acts 15:20](#); [1 Cor. 6:18](#); [7:2, 9](#); [1 Thess. 4:3](#); note the imagery in [2 Cor. 11:2](#)).

God requires not only right conduct but also purity of heart: “You shall not covet ... your neighbor’s wife” ([Ex. 20:17](#); cf. [Prov. 6:25](#); [Matt. 5:27](#)). The opposite of desiring to commit adultery is having a deep love for one’s wife or husband and a strong desire for a positive sexual relationship within one’s own marriage, as well as a sense of revulsion at the thought of embracing anyone else in the same way. This purity of heart, like other inward virtues, needs prayerful cultivation if it is to be sustained.

Looking at pornography is a direct violation of Jesus’ command against gazing at a woman “with lustful intent” ([Matt. 5:28](#); cf. [Job 31:1–2](#)). Pornography attracts a man’s affections and desires away from his marriage and away from his wife. It inevitably brings moral uncleanness in the heart, long-lasting harmful memories, and destructive consequences to one’s marriage relationship (the same is true for the future marriage of those who are single). It ultimately leads in many cases to other sins, such as prostitution, rape, and other kinds of violence against women, because it dehumanizes them and fails to recognize and respect them as persons made in God’s image and valuable in his sight.

Differing Roles in Marriage

The Bible clearly affirms that both men and women are created in God's image and have equal value and dignity in God's sight and for the work of his kingdom on earth ([Gen. 1:27, 31](#); [Acts 2:17–18](#); [8:12](#); [Gal. 3:28](#); [1 Pet. 3:7](#)). At the same time, the Bible indicates that husband and wife are called to different roles in marriage. God gives to the husband a responsibility for loving, humble headship (or leadership) in the marriage. Husbands are to love their wives “as Christ loved the church” ([Eph. 5:25](#)), and “the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church” ([Eph. 5:23](#)). God has given to the wife a responsibility for joyful, intelligent submission to her husband's headship and support of her husband's leadership role (though never to comply if her husband tells her to sin against God). The NT says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” ([Eph. 5:22](#)). These distinct roles are affirmed in a number of NT passages (cf. [1 Cor. 11:3](#); [Col. 3:18–19](#); [Titus 2:5](#); [1 Pet. 3:1–7](#)). Since these responsibilities are patterned on the relationship between Christ and the church, they are not due to particular circumstances in individual cultures or societies but are applicable for all marriages, for all cultures and all time. They are a part of the “very good” creation that God established from the beginning. In addition, such “equality in value” but “difference in roles” between husbands and wives reflects the equality in deity but differences in roles between the Father and the Son in the Trinity (see note on [1 Cor. 11:3](#)).

Are there other distinctive roles for men and women in marriage? Husbands and wives will often share in responsibilities and help each other as partners in establishing a household and raising a family. Yet a number of passages suggest that the primary responsibility for providing for the family and protecting the family belongs to the husband, while the primary responsibility for caring for the home and children belongs to the wife. See, e.g., [Genesis 3:14–19](#) (note that pain is introduced into Eve's responsibility of childbearing and Adam's responsibility of tilling the ground to raise food); [Isaiah 4:1](#) (a reversal of the normal order in a time of God's judgment); [1 Timothy 5:3–16](#) (widows, not widowers, are to be supported by the church); and [Titus 2:5](#). There is a pattern of men having responsibility to protect women and children in [Numbers 1:2–3](#); [Deuteronomy 3:18–19](#); [20:7–8](#); [24:5](#); [Joshua 1:14](#); [23:10](#); [Judges 4:8–10](#); [9:54](#); [1 Samuel 4:9](#); [Nehemiah 4:13–14](#); [Jeremiah 50:37](#); [Nahum 3:13](#). Yet these passages (concerning men providing for and protecting their loved ones, and women caring for children) present narrative patterns rather than direct commands (as with headship and submission), so it seems that Scripture gives somewhat more freedom for individual differences in these areas.

Divorce and Remarriage

God's Original Plan

God's original plan for the human race, as indicated in his creation of Adam and Eve as husband and wife, is lifelong, monogamous marriage. Jesus affirmed this in responding to a question about divorce:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female [from [Gen. 1:27](#)], and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ [from [Gen. 2:24](#)]? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” ([Matt. 19:3–6](#)).

In this reply Jesus rebukes and corrects a first-century practice of easy divorce for trivial reasons. For example, the Mishnah said, “The school of Shammai says: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her. ... And the school of Hillel say [he may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him. ... Rabbi Akiba says, [he may divorce her] even if he found another fairer than she” (Mishnah, *Gittin* 9.10). Rather

than entering into this debate among rabbis, Jesus first affirms God's original plan for marriage and shows that it remains God's ideal for all marriages.

Malachi views marriage as a "covenant" between a husband and wife, a covenant to which God was a witness and to which therefore God will hold people accountable: "the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant" ([Mal. 2:14](#)). Therefore marriage is an especially serious commitment (1) between husband and wife, (2) to the society in which they live, and (3) before God himself (whether or not he is explicitly acknowledged in the marriage ceremony).

But What If One Spouse Is Unfaithful?

In marriage, a man and a woman commit to live with each other as husband and wife for life. In order for them to keep this commitment, both parties have to remain in the marriage. But when one party decides to leave the marriage for another partner, it becomes impossible for the remaining spouse to faithfully fulfill his or her commitment (a husband, e.g., cannot live with and act as a husband to a wife who is living with another man). Because of such cases, it seems that in both the OT and the NT God allowed divorce, in order to give some relief to the one spouse when the other has deserted the marriage or desecrated it by adultery.

Although divorces took place in OT times (assumed by [Lev. 21:7, 14](#); [Num. 30:9](#); [Deut. 24:1–4](#)), the only OT law concerning divorce is found in [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#) (see [note](#)). It envisions a situation in which a man divorces and sends away his wife, she subsequently remarries, and then becomes divorced or widowed. In such a case the law forbids the first husband to marry her again.

Jesus' Teachings on Divorce

Many of the first-century rabbis expanded on [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#), using it to justify divorce for many reasons, even trivial ones (see above). This fact lies behind the remainder of the exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus in [Matthew 19](#):

They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery" ([vv. 7–9](#)).

Jesus' statement, "Because of your hardness of heart," should not be understood to imply that only "hard-hearted" individuals initiate divorce but rather, "because your hard-hearted rebellion against God led to serious defilement of marriages." The presence of sin in the community meant that some marriages would be deeply harmed, and God therefore provided divorce as a solution in those cases.

When Jesus says that anyone who divorces his wife "*except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery" ([Matt. 19:9](#)), he implies the converse: divorce and remarriage on the ground of one's spouse's sexual immorality are *not* prohibited and do *not* constitute adultery. It is the one exception Jesus makes to the requirement that marriage be lifelong, for sexual immorality seriously defiles, indeed disrupts, the "one flesh" union ([Matt. 19:5](#)). When Jesus says, "and marries another," he implies that both divorce and remarriage are allowed in the case of sexual immorality and that someone who divorces because his spouse has committed adultery may marry someone else without committing sin (see notes on [Matt. 19:3–9](#)). Therefore, if "sexual immorality" (Gk. *porneia*, which included any sexual intercourse contrary to the moral commands of Scripture) occurs, then divorce is allowed but not required. In fact, forgiveness and reconciliation, restoring the marriage, should always be the first option.

Where divorce was allowed—in Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture—the right to remarry (another person) was always assumed in the first century. For example, the Mishnah says, “The essential formula in the bill of divorce is, ‘lo, thou art free to marry any man’” (Mishnah, *Gittin* 9.3).

But in [Matthew 19:1–9](#) where Jesus allows divorce on the grounds of *porneia*, Jesus was simultaneously prohibiting divorce on the numerous other grounds that were being invoked in the first century. If divorce is secured for other reasons (but see a further exception below), then God does not count the divorce as valid (for such divorcers would be committing adultery should they marry someone else; see [Matt. 19:9](#)).

In [Matthew 5:32](#), Jesus affirms essentially the same teaching:

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Jesus says that the husband who wrongfully divorces his wife “makes her commit adultery” because in that society, it was assumed that a divorced woman would usually need to marry someone else for financial support and protection, and yet Jesus still says this new relationship is, at least initially, “adultery” because there was not a proper reason for the divorce. But Jesus places most of the blame on the husband who wrongly divorced her, saying that he thereby “makes her commit adultery.” In the last sentence of the passage, “whoever marries a divorced woman” should be taken in context with the preceding sentences, and so it means, “and whoever marries such a wrongly divorced woman as I have just spoken about ...” (see note on [Matt. 5:31–32](#)).

In the parallel statements about divorce in [Mark 10:11–12](#) and [Luke 16:18](#), Jesus does not include the exception clause, “except for sexual immorality.” The most likely reason is that there was no dispute or disagreement among Jews, or in Greek or Roman culture, that adultery was a legitimate ground for divorce, and Jesus is not addressing that issue (see notes on [Mark 10:10–11](#) and [Luke 16:18](#)). This does not invalidate the more extensive teaching given in Matthew, because Jesus’ acceptance of the exception for adultery, though not stated explicitly by Mark and Luke, was assumed as being beyond question. (Other interpreters think that [Mark 10:11–12](#) and [Luke 16:18](#) prohibit all divorces and they then understand [Matt. 5:32 and 19:9](#) to refer to special circumstances of some kind, not divorce in general.)

Does Paul Add a Second Reason for Divorce?

Many interpreters hold that Paul adds a second legitimate reason for divorce in [1 Corinthians 7:12–15](#). Paul is facing a new situation that was not addressed by Jesus—the situation of a Christian and non-Christian married to one another. (In the context to which Jesus was speaking, Jewish people only married other Jews, and both husband and wife therefore were part of the Jewish religious community.) When a believer has an unbelieving spouse, Paul says that they should remain married if the unbeliever is willing to do so ([1 Cor. 7:12–14](#)). “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace” ([1 Cor. 7:15](#)). Most interpreters think this implies the freedom to obtain a legal divorce and the freedom to marry someone else. When an unbelieving spouse has deserted the marriage, God releases the believing spouse from the twin unending stresses of (1) a lifelong vain hope of reconciling with an unbeliever who has left, and (2) a lifelong prohibition against enjoying the good blessings of marriage again. (But some interpreters hold that remarriage is never allowed after divorce. On that view, Paul is saying only that the believing spouse is not bound to continue to seek reconciliation.)

Would this passage apply to desertion by someone who professes to be a Christian? In such cases, a question arises as to whether the person is genuinely a believer or is making a false profession of faith. Each situation will be different, and a Christian involved in such a difficult circumstance should seek wise counsel from the leaders of his or her church. Where possible, the steps of church discipline outlined in [Matthew 18:15–17](#) should be followed in an attempt to bring reconciliation to the marriage. If that process results in the final

step of excommunication from the church, then it would seem appropriate to treat the deserting spouse as an unbeliever (“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”; [Matt. 18:17](#)). But it must be emphasized that, if reconciliation of the marriage can at all be brought about, that should always be the first goal.

Are There Other Grounds for Divorce?

In addition to the two grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbelieving spouse, are there any other legitimate, biblical grounds for divorce? Some interpreters have argued that repeated instances of physical abuse should be seen as an additional legitimate ground for divorce. Others would respond that many other means should be used to bring the abuse to an immediate halt, including separation (for the eventual purpose of bringing restoration along with the complete cessation of the abuse), church discipline, confrontation and counseling, police action, a court order, and other kinds of intervention by church members, family, and friends. But these would stop short of adding a reason for divorce that neither Jesus nor Paul specified.

Some have argued that a prominent school of rabbinic interpretation in the time of Jesus allowed divorce in cases where a husband did not provide enough material or emotional support to his wife. This was based on their interpretation of a law concerning a slave woman in [Exodus 21:10–11](#). Since Jesus did not explicitly correct this view, they argue that he must have allowed the legitimacy of some other kinds of divorces, such as divorce for prolonged, unrepented physical or emotional abuse. But an argument from what Jesus did *not* say is of dubious validity, especially since Jesus’ words “whoever divorces his wife” ([Matt. 19:9](#)) are so extensive in scope and seem to rule out additional exceptions not specified in the Bible itself.

What should be done if someone has been divorced for other reasons than those given in the Bible and then has married someone else? Jesus says that in such a case the person has committed “adultery” ([Matt. 19:9](#)), so the marriage began with adultery. But when Jesus says, “and marries another” in that same verse, he implies that the second marriage is in fact a true marriage. Jesus does not say, “and *lives outside of marriage* with another” (which was possible, see [John 4:18](#)), but “and *marries* another.” Therefore, once a second marriage has occurred, it would be further sin to break it up, for it would be destroying another marriage. The second marriage should not be thought of as continually living in adultery, for the man and woman are married to each other, not to anyone else. The responsibility of the husband and wife in such a case is to ask God for his forgiveness for previous sin, and then for his blessing on the current marriage, and to strive to make the current marriage a good and lasting one.

With respect to the phrase “husband of one wife” in [1 Timothy 3:2](#) and [Titus 1:6](#), some argue that this means that a person has never been married more than once, and therefore that it excludes from the office of elder all men who have been divorced for whatever reason and also all whose wives have died and who have subsequently married someone else. But a better understanding of this passage is that it refers to the *present status* of a man, either to his character of being faithful to his wife, or else to the fact that he does not have more than one wife (see note on [1 Tim. 3:2–3](#)). In either of these better interpretations, the verse does not prohibit all divorced men from being elders, but each case should be evaluated on an individual basis.

Since marriage is not an institution only for Jews and Christians but is an institution established by God at creation, it is for all people, believers and unbelievers alike, and is in fact universal in the human community. The standards expressed here for divorce and remarriage are therefore applicable to all people. The church, where it has opportunity, should encourage non-Christians as well as Christians to abide by God’s high moral standards regarding divorce and remarriage. However, in cultures where rampant divorce for all sorts of reasons is common and has been occurring for decades, individual Christians as well as churches should seek to support and minister to the many women and men and children who have been hurt by divorces in the past, as well as the casualties of divorces in the present.

The principles expressed in this article represent the most commonly held view among Protestants since the time of the Reformation (e.g., see the 17th-century *Westminster Confession of Faith* 24.5, 6). Other views are also held by some evangelicals, however. Some hold that the exception clauses in [Matthew 5:32 and 19:9](#) apply only to sexual immorality committed during the betrothal period (when a couple was legally pledged to be married), and do not apply to marriage proper, and therefore there are no legitimate grounds for divorce. Others argue that, where a divorce has occurred, for whatever reason, remarriage is never allowed. And others have argued that there should be some additional, but limited, grounds for divorce. But these views have not gained majority support among evangelical interpreters of the Bible.

Homosexuality - God's Original Design

In God's original design, human sexual conduct was to occur within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. The first chapter of the Bible says, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" ([Gen. 1:27](#)). Differentiation of the human race into two complementary sexes ("male and female") is the first fact mentioned in connection with being "in the image of God." In [Genesis 2](#), which describes in more detail the process summarized in [1:27](#), God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" ([Gen. 2:18](#)). Genesis then applies the example of Adam and Eve to all marriages: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" ([Gen. 2:24](#)). This "one flesh" sexual union was thus established as the pattern for marriage generally, and Jesus cites [Genesis 1:27 and 2:24](#) as the normative pattern that God expects all marriages to follow (see [Matt. 19:4–6](#)). Furthermore Paul, as a good disciple of Jesus, likewise strongly echoes [Genesis 1:27 and 2:24](#) in his two primary texts on homosexual practice, [Romans 1:23–27](#) and [1 Corinthians 6:9](#). Jesus and Paul both assume the logic of sexual intercourse implied in Genesis: a sexual bond between a man and a woman requires two (and only two) different sexual halves ("a man" and "his wife") being brought together into a sexual whole ("one flesh").

This is further emphasized in the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's side:

And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh ([Gen. 2:22–24](#)).

The word "therefore" connects the making of Eve from a part of Adam's body with the "one flesh" sexual union between a man and a woman in marriage: it is the reunion of the two constituent parts of a sexual whole. It is not another man who is the missing part or sexual complement of a man, but rather a woman. (Jesus emphasizes this connection between the two different sexes, "male and female," in [Matt. 19:4–6](#) and [Mark 10:6–8](#).)

Prohibited Sexual Relations

Consistent with the pattern in [Genesis 1–2](#), sexual intercourse outside of the marriage relationship between one man and one woman is prohibited. For example, "You shall not commit adultery" ([Ex. 20:14](#); reaffirmed by Jesus in [Matt. 19:18](#); cf. [Rom. 13:9](#); [James 2:11](#)). In addition, other specific kinds of sexual intercourse outside of marriage are also prohibited, such as prostitution ([1 Cor. 6:15–18](#)), incest ([Lev. 20:11–21](#); [1 Cor. 5:1–2](#)), and bestiality ([Lev. 18:23](#); [20:15–16](#)).

Homosexual conduct is also viewed as a sin (something contrary to God's will) in several passages of the Bible. [Leviticus 18:22](#) says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination [Hb. *to'ebah*, actions that are extremely displeasing to God]." Similarly, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of

them have committed an abomination” ([Lev. 20:13](#); cf. [Genesis 19](#); also [Jude 7](#)). These absolute Levitical prohibitions are grouped with other relevant sex proscriptions (incest, adultery, bestiality) and are considered first-tier sexual offenses that are grouped together in [Leviticus 20:10–16](#).

In the NT, Paul speaks of homosexual conduct:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error ([Rom. 1:26–27](#)).

The phrase “contrary to nature” means that homosexual conduct does not represent what God intended when he made men and women with physical bodies that have a “natural” way of interacting with each other and “natural” desires for each other. (See note on [Rom. 1:26–27](#); cf. also [Rom. 1:19–20](#), that the truth about God and his moral law is visible and apparent in the material creation.) Homosexual desires are “dishonorable” both because they are contrary to God’s purpose and because they treat a person’s biological sex as only half of what it is. While the logic of a heterosexual bond is that of bringing together the two (and only two) different and complementary sexual halves into a sexual whole, the logic of a homosexual bond is that another person of the *same* sex complements, and fills what is lacking in, that same sex, implying that each participant is only half of his or her own sex: two half males making a full male or two half females making a full female. In other words, the logic of sexual intercourse requires a sexual complement, and thus a same-sex bond is a self-devaluing of one’s own gender inasmuch as one sees the need to complement structurally one’s own sex with someone of the same sex.

In a long list of sins, Paul also includes “men who practice homosexuality” ([1 Cor. 6:9](#)). This phrase translates two different Greek terms: *malakos* means “soft” or “effeminate” and was commonly used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to the “passive” partner in homosexual acts, while *arsenokoitēs* is a combination of Gk. *arsēn* (meaning “man”) and *koitē* (here meaning “sexual intercourse”). The term *arsenokoitēs* was apparently coined by Paul from the Septuagint (Greek translation) of [Leviticus 20:13](#), and means (in plural) “men who have intercourse with men.” In [1 Timothy 1:10](#) Paul uses the same word *arsenokoitēs* in the midst of vices derived from “the law” (here, the second half of the Ten Commandments), which means that this verse also should be interpreted as an absolute prohibition of male-with-male intercourse, in keeping with [Leviticus 18:22; 20:13](#). Early Jewish interpretation of [Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13](#), and early Christian interpretation of [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) and [1 Timothy 1:10](#), also show that these verses were understood as absolute prohibitions against all types of homosexual conduct.

Does the Bible address the question of homosexual attitudes and desires? It must be remembered that God ultimately requires moral perfection, not only in human actions but also in attitudes of the heart. Therefore the Bible prohibits not only adultery but also a desire for adultery ([Ex. 20:17](#); cf. [Matt. 5:28](#)), not only theft but also coveting ([Ex. 20:17](#)). This is because “the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” ([1 Sam. 16:7](#)). Therefore Scripture teaches that any desire to break God’s commandments is also viewed as wrong in God’s sight. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” ([Matt. 5:8](#)). While an impulse to do what God expressly forbids is (by definition) an impulse contrary to God’s will, the Bible recognizes that Christians will be “tempted” by their “own desire” ([James 1:14](#)) and encourages Christians in such circumstances to “remain steadfast” ([James 1:12](#)) and to “be doers of the word” ([James 1:22](#)). This implies not actively entertaining the wrongful impulse (cf. [Matt. 5:28](#)), and not dwelling on it so that it “gives birth to sin” ([James 1:15](#)).

It is not surprising, therefore, that not only homosexual conduct but also homosexual desires are viewed as contrary to God’s will. Homosexual desires are viewed as “dishonorable passions” ([Rom. 1:26](#)), and Paul also

says that homosexual partners are “consumed with passion for one another” ([Rom. 1:27](#)), giving a strong image of a powerful but destructive inward craving.

This is not to say that homosexual *desire* is as harmful as homosexual *conduct*. Though all sin is wrong and brings legal guilt before God (cf. [James 2:10–11](#)), a distinction between wrongful desires and wrongful actions can be made with regard to many areas of life. Hatred of another person is wrong in God’s sight, but murdering the person is far more harmful. Coveting a neighbor’s farm animals is wrong, but actually stealing them is much more harmful. And lustful desires for adultery are wrong, but actually committing adultery is far more harmful. Similarly, homosexual desires are wrong in God’s sight, but actually committing homosexual acts is far more harmful.

The Bible’s Solution regarding Homosexuality

As with every other sin, the Bible’s solution to homosexuality is trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, the imputation of righteousness, and the power to change. After talking about the “sexually immoral” and “adulterers” and “men who practice homosexuality” and “thieves” and “drunkards” ([1 Cor. 6:9–10](#)), Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, “And such were some of you” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#)). Then he tells them, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#); cf. [Rom. 6:23](#); [Phil. 2:13](#); [1 John 1:9](#)). This implies that some former homosexuals in the church at Corinth had left their previous homosexual lifestyle and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, were seeking to live lives of sexual purity, whether in celibacy or in faithful, heterosexual marriages.

It is important that the Christian community always show love and compassion toward those engaged in homosexual conduct, and also extend friendship toward them where opportunities arise, though not in a way that signals approval of homosexual practice. It is also important to extend hope for change, since many homosexuals will say that they long to establish a different pattern of life. However, a number of studies have concluded that long-term change from a homosexual lifestyle seldom occurs without a program of help and encouragement from others.

Objections

Numerous objections have been presented against the view that homosexuality is morally wrong. One objection is that some people are “born gay,” that is, that many homosexuals do not choose their homosexual orientation but it is part of their genetic makeup from birth, and so homosexuals can never change, and for them homosexual behavior cannot be wrong. But, as noted above, Paul, in talking about “men who practice homosexuality” ([1 Cor. 6:9](#)), says to the Corinthian church, “And such were some of you” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#)), indicating that homosexuals can change and become former homosexuals. This does not mean that homosexual desires will automatically or necessarily be eradicated for those who come to Christ. Becoming a Christian does not mean that people will no longer experience intense sinful urges (sexual or otherwise). But genuine faith does produce the fruit of obedience and real, substantive change, and Paul indicates that this is precisely what happened with some who had practiced homosexuality in Corinth.

Some argue that science supports the argument that homosexuality is determined by one’s biological makeup from before the time of birth. Studies have in fact shown some indirect, congenital influences on homosexual development that may increase the *likelihood* of homosexual development. But there are certain hereditary factors that give people a greater likelihood of developing all sorts of different sinful behavior patterns (such as frequent wrongful anger, violence, adultery, alcoholism, and so forth), and it would not be surprising to find that some people, from certain hereditary backgrounds, have a greater likelihood of developing homosexual desires and conduct. But this is far different from proving congenital *determinism* of homosexuality, that is, that some people are genetically incapable of making any other choice than to entertain homosexual desires

and engage in homosexual conduct. Especially significant are studies of identical twins, where one has become a homosexual and the other has not, even though they have identical genetic makeup.

The moral teachings of God's Word, not people's inward desires, must be the final standard of right and wrong. It is important to recognize that (1) virtually all behavior is, at some level, biologically influenced, and that (2) no command of God is predicated for its validity on humans first losing all desire to violate the command in question.

As for environmental factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of homosexual behavior, two of the most significant, particularly for male homosexuals, are the physical or emotional absence of a caring father during childhood years, and sexual abuse sometime during childhood or adolescence.

Another objection is to say that the biblical passages concerning homosexuality only prohibit certain kinds of homosexual conduct, such as homosexual prostitution or pedophilia, or unfaithful homosexual relationships. (This is sometimes called the "exploitation argument": the Bible only prohibits exploitative forms of homosexuality.) But there is no legitimate evidence in the words of any of these verses, or their contexts, or in evidence from the ancient world, to prove that the verses were referring to anything less than all kinds of homosexual conduct by all kinds of people. Two biblical counterarguments against the "exploitation argument" may be briefly mentioned: (1) In [Romans 1:23–27](#) Paul clearly echoes [Genesis 1:27](#), indicating that Paul viewed any sexual relationship that did not conform to the creation paradigm of "male and female" to be a violation of God's will, irrespective of whether the relationship is loving. (2) Paul's absolute indictment against all forms of homosexuality is underscored by his mention of lesbian intercourse in [Romans 1:26](#), since this form of intercourse in the ancient world was not typically characterized by sex with adolescents, slaves, or prostitutes.

Some have suggested that the Sodom and Gomorrah episode does not point to judgment on homosexual practice, but relates only to coercive homosexual practice. But [Genesis 19:4–5](#) indicates that homosexual conduct was characteristic of the entire city and was a primary reason for God's judgment (cf. the note on [Jude 7](#)).

Some object that the phrase "contrary to nature" in [Romans 1:26–27](#) shows that Paul is only talking about people who "naturally" feel desires toward a person of the opposite sex but who then practice homosexuality. Paul says, "For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another" ([Rom. 1:26–27](#)). According to this view, Paul is not saying anything about people who "naturally" feel desires for a person of the same sex, for such desires would not be "contrary to *that person's* nature." However, this is reading into the text a restriction that has no basis in the actual words that Paul wrote. He does not say "contrary to *their* nature," but "contrary to nature" (Gk. *para physin*), a phrase that is used several times in literature outside the Bible to speak of all kinds of homosexual conduct as something contrary to the natural order of the world. In other words, Paul is not saying in [Romans 1:24–27](#) that some people switched their innate heterosexual urges for contrived homosexual urges, but rather that people exchanged or left behind sexual relations with a true sexual complement (someone of the other sex) to gratify their inward urges for sex with members of the same sex. Paul sees such people as choosing to follow their desires over God-ordained creation structures.

Finally, there is an objection from experience: some homosexual "couples" have faithful, fulfilling relationships, so why should these be thought immoral? But experience should not be used as a higher standard for moral right and wrong than the teaching of the Bible. In addition, many studies indicate that, particularly among male homosexuals, long-term one-partner relationships are uncommon, and the widespread pattern is many sexual partners, often numbering many hundreds over the years. An additional harmful result of homosexual conduct is often immense damage to the family structures of a society and also to

physical health (e.g., various studies have shown a significant reduction in life expectancy for homosexual males compared to the general population).

Same-sex Marriage?

Proposals for governments to recognize “same-sex marriage” should be evaluated in light of the Bible’s teaching that one role of civil government is to “praise those who do good” ([1 Pet. 2:14](#)). Government recognition of a relationship as a “marriage” carries with it the *endorsement* and *encouragement* of that relationship by a society. Married couples enjoy many protections and benefits (legal, financial, and interpersonal) that society has granted in order to encourage marriage and signal that the institution of marriage brings benefits to society as a whole. So the question is really whether a society, through its laws, should give approval and encouragement to homosexual relationships that both the Bible and most cultures throughout history have considered to be morally wrong rather than “good,” and that also bring significant harmful consequences. Governmental recognition of “same-sex marriage” would imply a requirement to allow homosexual couples to adopt and raise children, and this would rob many children of the opportunity to be raised in a home with both a father and a mother, which is by far the best environment for them. In addition, government recognition would likely soon carry with it governmental prohibitions against criticizing homosexual conduct.

Conclusion

Homosexual conduct of all kinds is consistently viewed as sin in the Bible, and recent reinterpretations of the Bible that have been raised as objections to that view do not give a satisfactory explanation of the words or the context of the relevant verses. Sexual intimacy is to be confined to marriage, and marriage is to be only between one man and one woman, following the pattern established by God in creation. The church should always act with love and compassion toward homosexuals, yet never affirm homosexual conduct as morally right. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers the “good news” of forgiveness of sins and real hope for a transformed life to homosexuals as well as to all sinners.



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English Standard Version Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.