

What's wrong with a permanent, faithful, stable same-sex sexual relationship?

The truest vision of life I know is that bird in the Venerable Bede that flutters from the dark into a lighted hall, and after a while flutters out again into the dark...It is something - it can be everything - to have found a fellow bird with whom you can sit among the rafters while the drinking and boasting and reciting and fighting go on below; a fellow bird whom you can look after and find bugs and seeds for; one who will patch your bruises and straighten your ruffled feathers and mourn over your hurts when you accidentally fly into something you can't handle.¹

Permanent, faithful, stable relationships are beautiful. And essential to human flourishing – as Stegner reminds us. So what could possibly be wrong with a permanent, faithful, stable same-sex relationship? Indeed this sort of relationship is now recognised as a marriage by a number of states throughout the world.

Exposure to these sorts of same-sex relationships has certainly done much to change people's minds on homosexuality. Many have been opposed to homosexuality until they got to know the nice gay couple next door or because their niece has found happiness at last with her lovely new girlfriend.

I've even told that my opposition to homosexual practice will crumble when I finally meet the man of my dreams. I'll become accepting of permanent, faithful, stable relationships then. I've friends and family who are looking forward to the 'wedding'. They're pretty sure it will eventually happen.

So is it just the absence of the right man that is stopping me changing my mind on the morality of permanent, faithful, stable same-sex relationships? Well, the right man coming along will certainly challenge my behaviour, but he will have to change my mind on a couple of key truths:

The good in something doesn't make it right in God's sight

We'd be crazy to deny the good in permanent, stable, faithful same-sex sexual relationships. Read accounts of the gay community at the height of the AIDS epidemic and you'll be moved to tears by the self-sacrificial love of couples who devotedly nursed both loved ones and complete strangers. We need to realise how much the gay community has to teach us about the meaning of the word 'community' – Andrew Marin writes:

I have never met a more loving community in my life than the GLBT community. Obviously there are exceptions in any community, but in general I've found that GLBT people don't care if you're skinny, hairy, fat, pimpled, a millionaire or dead broke; there is room for everyone. All they want is to give the same love to others as they want to receive themselves.²

We certainly don't deny that there are real elements of beauty in the relationship of the nice gay couple next door. Their commitment and love are part of God's common grace to humanity. The happiness your niece is enjoying is a good that God has created for us to enjoy. Her happiness is real.

But, crucially, the good in something doesn't make other aspects of it right in God's sight. All human beings are capable of doing things that are good – if never completely so (2 Kings 12:2; Luke 11:13). But these echoes of our original perfection do not make us right in God's

sight (Romans 3:10-20). Jesus' death is required for God to declare that so (Romans 3:21-26).

Similarly the many good things we might see or experience in a permanent, faithful, stable same-sex sexual relationship don't by themselves make the sexual aspect of the relationship legitimate. At its centre is sex outside the permanent, stable, faithful marriage of a man and a woman - something that God has never declared to be right in his sight. The good in the relationship doesn't, can't ever make its sexual dimension right to him.

But, of course, all of this begs the question: why is a same-sex sexual relationship so wrong in God's sight? Here we come to our second key truth:

Real sex is unity in difference

This is made very clear right at the beginning. Read Genesis 1:27 where two distinct sexes are created. Read Genesis 2:24 where sex is created as the union of these two different sexes. Through sexual intercourse a man and a woman become, spiritually and literally, one. That is what real sex is all about.

And that is why sex outside marriage can't be right in God's sight. Just as permanence and faithfulness are required to truly unite two different people, so is the fact that the two people are fundamentally different. If we remove one integral aspect of the biblical picture of marriage (sexual difference) why should we retain its other essential features such as permanence and fidelity?

But why is that sexual difference so significant to God? Why see it as so important as to deny some people the joy of sex? Because sex and marriage between the different sexes is there to provide a picture of the permanent, faithful, stable relationship between God and his people (Hosea 2) and, in particular, Jesus and the church (Ephesians 5:28-32). This is the greatest marriage ever in which two essentially different realities, God and his people, become one for all of time (Revelation 21:1-4). Marriage exists primarily to point us to this union of difference – between God and humanity – with which the world will end. Start redefining marriage and you are destroying the essential beauty of God's eternal picture of his love for his people.

So actually what often makes heterosexual sexual relationships so difficult for humans – the difference between the sexes - is what makes them so beautiful in God's sight. Melinda Selmys, a Christian with experience of both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, reflects on this:

It is because of, and not in spite of, the tensions between the sexes that marriage works. Masculinity and femininity each have their vices and their strengths. The difficulty when you have two women or two men together is that they understand each other too well, and are thus inclined more to excuse than forgive. That frank bafflement which inevitably sets in, in any heterosexual relationship ("Why on earth would he do that? I just don't understand...") never set in throughout all of the years that my girlfriend and I were together - naturally enough. We were both women, and we chose each other because we seemed to be particularly compatible women.³

So if I'm ever tempted to get 'married' to a man I'll need to be reminded that real sex is unity in difference. However easy and natural it might feel for me to be in a sexual relationship with a man that does not make it right in God's sight.

So, in the end, what it all comes down to is, as ever, a decision to trust in God and what he says in the Bible. Why should I do that? Catholic theologian Christopher Roberts helps me:

Scripture is full of individuals and communities who do not know who they are until God reveals it to them. To insist on a theological premise for understanding sexual difference

is to insist that we learn from this pattern and wait in trust that who we are in the sexual sphere is a datum that will come from God and nowhere else. Israel was once not a people, but now called together by God, it is "a people" (1 Peter 2:10, alluding to Hosea 1:9). Israel cannot know that it is a chosen people beloved by a faithful God, until it is told and its election is announced to it. At the individual level, biblical patriarchs, prophets and priests often resist their vocation until their true identity is forced upon them: Abraham, Jacob, Peter, and Paul do not know their true names until God renames them and reorients their lives.

For Christians, especially postmodern Christians bereft of any consensus, sexual difference is in a similar category. We will not know what it means until we allow God to tell us what it means. The tradition has claimed that we do not know who we are and what it means to find ourselves until we allow the premises and practices of revelation to unfold. In the tradition, stretching from Augustine to John Paul II, sexual difference is not mute, inert, nonexistent, or indifferent. In this tradition, God brings man to woman and tells the two sexes something that they would otherwise not know: that their creation is good, that their creation as two sexes is for the sake of enabling a church and covenant, and that despite their fallenness, their twoness can in itself become a witness to reconciliation and redemption through marriage. Marriage gives this aspect of our creation the power to testify, and the nonmarried offer supporting testimony through their chastity, which creates the social ecology supporting marriage.

All of this is the far from self-evident significance of sexual difference. But that argument cannot begin to be made without the even more fundamental premise that "Your life is hidden with Christ" (Colossians 3:3).⁴

Need more help in understanding that? Then read his book! It's good. But to reiterate his closing thought, it all comes down to Jesus. I am willing to forgo a permanent, faithful, stable same-sex sexual relationship in the here and now because I am already enjoying a permanent, faithful, stable relationship with him in all his beauty. A relationship that will, one day, be perfectly consummated in the new heavens and new earth. His is the truest vision of life that I know, and so I'm willing to put my trust in him.

Ed Shaw

¹ Wallace Stegner, *Spectator Bird*, p.213.

² Andrew Marin, *Love is an Orientation*, p.166.

³ Melinda Selmys, *Sexual Authenticity*, p.113.

⁴ Christopher C Roberts, *Creation & Covenant*, p.247.