

Did the New Testament (including Paul), know of loving, stable, faithful same-sex relationships such as we know today?

In certain respects the experience of these two worlds – the New Testament's and ours – is identical.

- **The First Century Greek World, like our world today, knew a considerable range of same-sex relationships:** from the exploitative to the tender and nurturing, from the one night stand to the long term, from the paid for to the freely and lovingly given. There were male prostitutes then; there are male prostitutes today. There were sex slaves then; there are sex slaves today. There were deeply felt, loving relationships then; there are deeply felt, loving relationships today.
- **The clear ideal was for a loving, stable, faithful relationship** in the world that Paul and the New Testament knew, in those Greek circles – and they were many, though not universal – where same-sex relationships were approved. Opportunistic sex certainly with freeborn males – that is: the one-night stand, sex just for sex's sake – was severely disapproved of and would elicit almost universal condemnation. If you were going to enter into acts of same-sex relationships with anyone of your social background, it was to be long term and within a relationship of love and mutual commitment, of which sex was only one part. In that, the world that the New Testament knew, and our world, are entirely similar.
- **Peer relationships, relationships between people of the same age, did exist.** One classic example is that between Pausanias and the playwright Agathon. This was a lifelong relationship, mentioned by Plato both in the Symposium and in his Protagoras.

However, it is also true to say that there are dissimilarities and discontinuities between the relationships that existed in New Testament times and now including :

The relationship then was commonly between a full adult and an adolescent. Just as in our world, same-sex relationships with children were considered taboo. But many relationships were between fully grown men, often comparatively young men, and teenagers or those in their early 20s.

There are other issues that it is important to be aware of:

Peer relationships may have been more frequent in Macedon than in, say, Athens. Alexander the Great, King of Macedon, famously had a very intimate relationship, probably sexual, with his peer Hephaestion. Sexual relationships are recorded among the Royal Pages, a corps of élite adolescents at the Macedonian Court. And it is probably significant that Pausanias and Agathon moved to Macedon.

If this is the case, it's important to realize that **the world of the New Testament was under Macedonian Greek influence.** It was Macedon, under Alexander the Great, that conquered the world in which Paul and the other New Testament writers grew up and while of course Rome, by the time that the New Testament was written, ruled Tarsus, Galilee and Judea, Greek influence was still massive. So same-age, same-sex relationships did exist in the world within which the New Testament was written even if they were less common than in our Western society today.

In either case – same-sex relationships between those of the same or different age – love and affection was expected on both sides: the older man, the lover – the erastes – was to be affectionate, protective and committed to the one he loved; the younger man, the beloved – the eromenos – was to be affectionate, honouring and committed to the one with whom he was in relationship. These were not fly-by-night, sexually exploitative, relationships; mutual, caring, committed love was certainly the ideal; just as it is the ideal in most gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships today.

The relationship was not normally expected to be for life but until full, mature manhood. It was a relationship of mentoring, teaching, protecting, passing on of wisdom, maturing. Doubtless there would always be a special bond of affection between the two men but it was considered appropriate that the adolescent should at some point between the age of about 20 and 28 come of age and, grateful for the relationship, move on from it and perhaps begin a mentoring, but also sexual, relationship with a younger man in his turn – though, in fact, as we’ve seen, there are also much rarer examples of same-sex relationships that were for life. Agathon died at the age of nearly 50; we don’t know how old Pausanias was when he died.

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These are the kind of relationships that the New Testament writers knew about and witnessed; these were what they were writing about, as well as the more exploitative kind. And it’s **quite clear that the New Testament stands against all same-sex relationships of whatever kind.** There is not a shred of evidence that the New Testament writers found some forms of same-sex relationships acceptable, while others were not.

It is also clear that the **New Testament has the highest regard for the single or celibate life,** for those who, as Jesus says ‘make themselves eunuchs’, that is: refrain from sexual activity, ‘for the sake of [obedience to] the kingdom of heaven’. **And it does not at all believe that to have no outlet for sexual expression is a disaster. So Paul speaks highly of the single life (1 Corinthians 7:38)** because it allows all our focus to be on ‘how to please’, not other humans but, ‘the Lord’ (32) and on having what he calls ‘unhindered devotion to the Lord’ (35).