

Introduction

As Pastors and Elders at The Tree Church, we are asked questions about our understanding of what scripture has to say to the Church. Without a denominational body to dictate what we teach and why we teach it, the leadership of The Tree Church desires to clarify the official positions of our church body.

In creating an official position, we acknowledge the varying opinions held by brothers and sisters in Christ who disagree with the positions held within these pages. The Tree Church holds to these convictions with humility, but is confident that our interpretation is based on the best evidence for understanding the included passages.

We hope these papers clarify our position and invite discussion. If you disagree or have questions about our position, we hope this paper will lead to a conversation that allows us to grow in our understanding of God's Word together.

Overview

Same-sex marriage and attraction have been one of the most divisive topics in the church this decade. As culture has evolved its beliefs on homosexuality and its place in the culture, an unavoidable tension has arisen in the Church and has forced these questions: What does the Church believe the Bible says about homosexuality? How does the Church care for those who experience same-sex attraction? How do leaders of the Church respond to same-sex couples who wish to attend church, and even lead in the church?

This topic, like most, does not live in a theological bubble. Though theology informs The Tree's response to these questions, those in leadership recognize that we are responding to real people, many of whom are trying to figure out what God has to say about their sexual desires. The most difficult dynamic in the discussion of same-sex attraction is that for those who experience these feelings, it is not just a behavior to participate in, but a vital piece of their identity. This means that, as a church and its leaders, we are tasked to handle this topic with the delicacy and grace it deserves. We choose to walk in the steps of our Savior, who was full of grace and truth,¹ and live with understanding, compassion, and empathy, while holding to the convictions the Bible teaches. This is the tension that Jesus walked in and is the truly loving position.

What Does the Bible Teach About Homosexuality?

In Genesis 1:26-27, God creates humanity. Specifically, when He creates them, He makes them male and female (Gen. 1:27). He creates two complementary genders, different yet equal in reflecting His image to the creation He has placed them in. Their role in creation was to have dominion, to care for, and to steward the creation as God's representatives to the earth. God explains they are to do that by being fruitful and multiplying (Gen. 1:28 NRSV). The author of

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Genesis goes into more detail in Chapter 2, where he explains how humanity would fulfill this role.

God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone,” (Gen. 2:18 NRSV), so God puts the man to sleep and makes “woman” (Gen. 2:21-23 NRSV). He goes on to say that “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh,” (Gen. 2:24 NRSV), i.e., marriage, sexual relations, and bearing children. Genesis 2 culminates with an expression of the flourishing found in this design, “the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25 NRSV), expressing perfect union, void of shame, guilt, or abuse. Genesis contends that sexuality finds its design in the structure of two committed, different sexed partners, for the pleasures of relational intimacy and procreation.

This design is supported by both Jesus and Paul in the New Testament. Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in response to a question about divorce in Matthew 19:4-6. In Ephesians 5, Paul likens marriage to Christ and the Church, and in doing so, also quotes the Genesis 2:24 passage.

Within the creation narrative, the only example we have of a God-ordained romantic relationship is between a man and a woman. This is descriptive of how God designed our ancestors to exist and fulfill His command, but it is also prescriptive in that it explains these relationships as they should be.

It was within this design that human flourishing exists, and sexual fulfillment finds its foundation. It is when humanity embraced a life outside a relationship with God that sin and its consequences came to bear on our sexuality and all human existence. It is this relationship that Christ has restored, and in the context of this relationship, we work to reorient our ideas of romance, sexuality, and intimacy back toward this design.

The Bible explicitly speaks to homosexuality in four specific passages.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

Romans 1:26-27

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

1 Timothy 1:8-11

Each of these passages prohibits acting on same-sex attraction.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

“You are not to sleep with a man as with a woman; it is detestable.” (CSB)

“If a man sleeps with a man as with a woman, they have both committed a detestable act. They must be put to death; their death is their own fault.” (CSB)

Though Leviticus spends much time defining clean and unclean practices for the ceremonial purposes of temple worship, these passages occur in a list that describes the accepted and rejected sexual practices of the people God has chosen to represent Him. They clearly spell out a

sexual ethic forbidding incest, bestiality, pedophilia, child sacrifice, and, among these other practices, homosexuality. While the Christian is not bound to the Law, these passages are still applicable. This list of sexually immoral practices would have informed Jesus and the New Testament writers when they addressed the issue of sexual immorality. This ethic was not just for Jewish believers. In Acts 15, when Paul sought counsel about how to instruct the Gentile believers in their practices, the apostles simply stated that they “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from *sexual immorality*” (Acts 15:29 ESV, emphasis added). Paul continues to define this by including homosexuality in other places where sexual immorality is mentioned in the New Testament.

Romans 1:26-27:

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (NRSV)

Paul, in the opening of his letter to the Romans, is working his audience toward a specific understanding. As he gets to 1:18, he begins to paint a portrait of the human predicament and the need for Christ’s saving work. In this passage on the broken human condition, He expressly mentions same-sex relationships being a result of God giving people over to “the *lusts of their hearts* to impurity, to the *degrading of their bodies*” (Rom. 1:24 NRSV, emphasis added) because they failed to acknowledge God as God. Paul uses this extremely negative language to unambiguously say that engaging in a homosexual act is a result of “fallenness” and sin. Paul would go on to explain that practicing homosexuality, along with all other forms of sinfulness, will result in God’s righteous judgment on the Earth (Rom. 2). Yet, Christ came to bear that judgment (Rom. 3) and bring freedom to those who are willing to turn from their former ways (Rom. 5-8) and find life in Him.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” (ESV)

In the broader context of 1 Corinthians 6, Paul presents a contrasting picture of the behaviors of unbelievers outside the church versus those who claim to be followers of Christ. Although Paul’s list of differences between unbelievers and members of the Corinthian church is not comprehensive, it serves the purpose of defining the distinctions between those whose lives are guided by the Spirit and those whose lives are driven by their own desires.² This list is not limited to homosexual behaviors; it covers many sexual and non-sexual behaviors that stand in contrast to the Spirit in the believer’s life. Many of these practices were previously an active part of the believer’s life.³

In this list, Paul includes the **behavior** of homosexuality.⁴ Paul does not address same-sex attraction, but simply the behavior of following through on those same-sex desires, which makes the act of homosexual sex the issue at hand.

It is also of note, and indicative of Paul's thinking on homosexuality, that he does not single out homosexual behavior, but includes it in a list of multiple behaviors that are not part of a Spirit-led life. Nor does Paul claim it is an "unpardonable" sin. For those who once practiced homosexual behaviors, inclusion in this list is also an inclusion to Paul's assertion of forgiveness, now that they are in Christ (1 Cor. 6:11). Paul's encouragement is that since those who once practiced homosexuality (as with those who were drunkards, greedy, revilers, and thieves) are now in Christ, they should no longer pursue those behaviors.

1 Timothy 1:8-11

"Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted." (ESV)

As in the Corinthians passage above, Paul contrasts the behavior of the "just" with that of the "lawless and disobedient." Paul clearly has in mind that the practices on this list stand contrary to a standard God has set, or in other words, a "law." The law Paul refers to is not simply the Ten Commandments, but the principle of making legal demands.⁵ Paul is saying that God has set forth a code, or design, to live by. For the purposes of this discussion, Paul is using this law to lay down the boundaries that will define the behavior of believers. The law is not for the purpose of earning God's love or favor,⁶ or to make one sound wiser or learned.⁷ Rather, it is for showing us destructive behaviors that need to cease, good behaviors to practice, and to stand as a "mirror" to our own lives, which point to our need for Christ.⁸

In this list of behaviors that believers are to refrain from, Paul includes the act of homosexual sex.

Summary of Scriptural Interpretation

The Tree Church holds to the understanding that the entirety of the biblical narrative puts forth an ethic of sexuality that flourishes within the commitment of male and female marriage; outside of this circumstance, individuals are to remain celibate. There is no place in scripture where the practice of same-sex relationships is spoken of in an affirming way.

Same-sex attraction is something both believers and unbelievers have experienced since humanity chose to reject their relationship with God. While cultural acceptance is a fairly new

phenomenon, same-sex attraction and homosexual practice are not. We recognize that people may have inherently experienced same-sex attraction their entire life, but this is not a God-given desire; it is a result of the fall. While these desires are not God's original intent, having same-sex attraction is not the sin defined by Paul in scripture. The sin is the behavior of homosexuality itself, which would be defined as a same-sex relationship that is for the purposes of romantic and sexual pleasure.

If I Experience Same-Sex Attraction, How Will I Be Treated?

Our desire at The Tree Church is to foster a safe, loving, and transparent environment that recognizes we are all working at becoming people who follow and trust Jesus with our entire lives. Those experiencing same-sex attraction will be welcomed with open arms and invited into a loving community. This also means they will be challenged to embrace a godly lifestyle and reject sin in the same manner as we challenge every person who attends The Tree. Same-sex practice will be addressed as sinful in the same manner as any other practice Scripture identifies as sin. It will not be specifically highlighted or called out above anything the Bible calls sin.

Are There Restrictions for Those Who Experience Same-Sex Attraction?

If you are someone who experiences same-sex attraction and has chosen celibacy or marriage with the opposite sex, there are no restrictions to CORE Membership or leadership at The Tree Church. You can attend, volunteer, and be eligible for consideration for leadership positions. We do not require any prior disclosure of one's sexuality or struggles against sin in order to attend or become members. A natural byproduct of being on a team and in a Connect Group is that people will grow to know you. We encourage you to find friends you can trust so you can share what you are walking through and receive help and support.

What If I Give in to Same-Sex Attraction, and I Am a CORE Member?

If you are a CORE Member who experiences same-sex attraction and desire to live according to God's design and yet give in to this temptation, we ask that you do the same thing we ask all CORE members and followers of Jesus to do, repent, confess (to God and a trusted friend), and seek God for help and healing from the shame that comes when we fall into sin.

The pastoral staff will only get involved if there is a repeated pattern in the member's life or if the member holds a position of leadership. As leaders, our hearts are not to police people's lives, but to help them recognize and recover from sinful behaviors so they can find the life Christ desires for them.

If a CORE Member chooses to embrace a lifestyle and practice of homosexuality, the pastoral staff will call this member to repentance, and if they persist in the desire to embrace sin, their membership will be revoked, and they will be asked to separate from the community in the hopes that they will see the error of their ways, repent, and be reconciled to the church again.

What If I Am Living in a Homosexual Relationship?

We recognize that not everyone who begins attending The Tree agrees on every issue. For those who disagree with our interpretation of the Bible and wish to pursue a homosexual relationship, yet are still interested in attending The Tree, we desire for you to attend any of The Tree Church's events. We desire for The Tree to be a place where you can meet Jesus and foster a life-giving relationship with Him and His community. We desire that you get involved and see that life with Jesus is all that He promises it to be. We encourage you to get connected and become part of a serving team and Connect Group. We hope your time seeking Jesus with us will encourage great dialogue, promoting the growth of both yourselves and the church as we learn to care for your needs.

While our priority is creating a space where you can foster a relationship with Jesus and His community, it would be disingenuous not to mention that continuing to embrace a homosexual lifestyle at The Tree will lead to conversations that challenge this lifestyle, and this would limit your participation in some ways. Practicing homosexual partners would not be eligible for CORE Membership, nor would they be eligible to hold a leadership role. One of our CORE values is submission to church leadership, and because of our position here, we ask that to become a CORE Member, you cease the practice and walk in accordance with Scripture as defined above.

Will the Tree Church Marry or Support Homosexual Couples?

Our primary desire is to lovingly walk in relationship and point people to Jesus. This means that we will offer individual support and counseling to those navigating the challenges of obedience to God in their sexuality. Yet, our commitment to the biblical sense of love that does what is best for others (i.e., helping them in obedience to Jesus) and our Scriptural conclusions require us to refuse same-sex marriage, marriage counseling, or couples' counseling for practicing homosexual couples.

Conclusion

We understand that the position of The Tree Church stands in the face of the cultural norm and that what we are contending for is a lifestyle that requires a great deal of sacrifice for those who experience same-sex attraction. We do not hold this position for the sake of being exclusive or close-minded. We wholeheartedly believe that the promises our culture makes to those who experience same-sex attraction do not pay out. The life (or happiness) every human being is

pursuing is only found in a relationship with Jesus, where we walk in full submission to Him and His ways.

The Bible makes clear that same-sex attraction is not God's original design for humanity, and homosexual practice is a sin. For every believer, walking with Jesus is a practice of putting to death the things within us that stand in opposition to His design. By denying ourselves, we follow the example of Jesus and His path to a full and everlasting life. We view life with Christ as the ultimate reward, not the fulfillment of every earthly desire. This difficult, sacrificial, and new way of living is focused on that goal.

While we hold this to be true, not one person at The Tree Church lives up to this calling with 100% perfection. We are all on a journey striving toward the above end. We are all guilty of being tempted by, and giving in to, desires that stand in opposition to God's design. We all need the grace and mercy God extends to us. What defines the believer is the desire and the purposed pursuit of following the path of Christ and finding life God's way.

We hope to be a loving and supportive place where those who experience same-sex attraction can follow Jesus and find support and love in a shame-free environment, surrounded by other imperfect people who are all striving to become more like Jesus.

APPENDIX:

Differing Interpretive Practices Regarding the Above Passages.

There has been discussion in the Church at large about whether these passages mean exactly what they say, or if they are a cultural prescription inserted into the text because of the time when the scripture was written. That is because the culture looked down upon homosexual practice; the writers of the time included this viewpoint, but the cultural shift warrants a dismissal of these passages. In much the same way, slavery was once thought to be approved by scripture, but then we (rightfully) realized that slavery was deplorable. The passages used to condone slavery were once interpreted as a cultural prescript, while God never approved of slavery.¹ The topic of homosexuality has been, and is currently being wrestled with, in much of the same manner scripturally. Many churches have accepted these arguments for the homosexuality passages being cultural and not moral, and have decided to celebrate same-sex practice and marriage.

At The Tree Church, we disagree with this understanding of these scriptures and hold that these passages are speaking to a moral issue for ALL TIME, not just a cultural issue addressed in a specific time. We feel the evidence best supports these passages, meaning exactly what they say.

We feel compelled to express our stance on these viewpoints, should the question arise.

¹ This is even a basic generalization and assumption of Christian beliefs at the time of slavery in the United States. Many pastors and churches decried slavery and helped with the abolitionist movement.

Alternative Viewpoint on Romans 1

Matthew Vines argues that this passage only refers to idolatry, that Paul is using it to address lustful same-sex relations, and did not have monogamous same-sex relationships in mind.⁹ Vines argues that the type of homosexual relationship sought after and desired in today's culture is different than what Paul and the ancient world had in mind. According to those who think along this line, the only homosexual lifestyle Paul would have known was cult prostitution, pederasty (man-boy), and slave domination.

This practice of homosexuality surely existed, yet it was not the only version of homosexuality in practice. Homosexuality within the context of a loving, consensual, monogamous relationship is not new. According to New Testament Scholar, N.T. Wright,¹⁰ there is no consensus that Paul's thought was merely toward cult practices or these other "bad" forms of same-sex practices. According to scholars such as Thomas Hubbard, William Loader, and Louis Crompton,¹¹ there is no consensus on the types of homosexual practices that occurred in the first century. These practices included cult prostitution, pederasty, and rape, as well as practices of consensual adult, and long-lasting relationships. Paul would certainly have been aware of these practices when writing Romans. Therefore, when Paul writes these passages to the Romans, he expressly means that all homosexual practices are a result of idolatry and are outside of the design God had intended in Genesis 1.¹²

¹ John 1:17

² 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

³ 1 Corinthians 6:11

⁴ The Greek defines this as both partners in the act. Giving more support to the claim that this was not just a reference to male prostitution. **μαλακός malakos**; a prim. word; *soft, effeminate*:—effeminate(1), soft(3); **ἀρσενικοίτης arsenokoitēs**; from 733b and 2845; *a sodomite*:—homosexuals(2) Thomas, Robert L. *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries : Updated Edition*. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998.

⁵ "In speaking of the law, Paul was not merely referring to the Ten Commandments or to the law of Moses. He was speaking of the principle of making legal demands, and he argued that legal demands are good if a person knows rightly how to make those demands. The law itself is intrinsically noble and honorable, but its teachers must use it according to its spirit and intention." Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (vol. 34; The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 70.

⁶ "yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 2:16.

⁷ 1 Timothy 1:3-7 The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV®

⁸ "Theologians have summarized three uses of the law. First, the Bible resembles a locked door to restrain individuals from trespassing onto the wrong territory (Rom 7:7; Ps 19:13). Second, the law resembles a mirror to reveal sin and lead us to Christ (Rom 3:19–20; Gal 3:24). Third, the law serves as a rule and guide to point out the works that please God (Rom 13:8–10)." Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (vol. 34; The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 70.

⁹ Matthew Vines, The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality, <http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript/>

¹⁰ "As a classicist, I have to say that when I read Plato's Symposium, or when I read the accounts from the early Roman empire of the practice of homosexuality, then it seems to me they knew just as much about it as we do. In particular, a point which is often missed, they knew a great deal about what people today would regard as longer-term, reasonably stable relations between two people of the same gender. This is not a modern invention, it's already there in Plato. The idea that in Paul's day it was always a matter of exploitation of younger men by older men or

whatever . . . of course there was plenty of that then, as there is today, but it was by no means the only thing. They knew about the whole range of options there.” National Catholic Reporter, Interview with Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright of Durham, England, May 21, 2004 <http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/wright.htm>

¹¹ Reference Not That Kind of Homosexuality, Kevin DeYoung, Gospel Coalition, November 13, 2014

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/not-that-kind-of-homosexuality/>

¹² “I’ve written quite extensively about Romans in various places, particularly my commentary in the New Interpreter’s Bible, and anything that I say should be filled in with what’s there. The main thing to realize about Romans 1:26 and following is that it isn’t just a side swipe out of the blue. Paul’s argument at that point is grounded in the narrative of Genesis 1, 2 and 3. As often, he’s referring to it obliquely, but it’s there under the text. He’s drawing on it at various stages. He sees the point about being human as being to reflect God’s image, which he says in a number of places in his writings. He clearly sees that in Genesis 1 it is male plus female who are made in the image of God. He chooses the practice of homosexuality, not as a random feature of “look, they do all sorts of wicked things.” His point is that when people in a society are part of an idolatrous system -- not necessarily that they individually are specifically committing acts of idolatry, but when the society as a whole worships that which is not the true God -- then its image-bearingness begins to deconstruct. An obvious sign of that for Paul, granted Genesis 1, is the breakup of male-female relations and the turning off in other directions. Then it’s important to see how that is stitched into the argument that he mounts later on in the letter about how humankind is restored. When in chapter four he talks about Abraham, he talks about Abraham specifically did the things which in chapter one that human beings did not. In chapter one, they refused to know God, to honor God as God, to acknowledge God’s power and deity, and all the rest of it. This is the end of Romans 4. The result of Abraham acknowledging God and God’s power, recognizing that God had the power to do what he promised and giving God glory, which is the exact opposite word-by-word of what he said in chapter one, is that Abraham and Sarah were able to conceive children even in their old age. It’s a specific reversal, the coming back together of male plus female, and then the being fruitful, which is the command of Genesis 1: “Be fruitful and multiply.” This is why he can talk in Romans 5 of how in Christ, who has fulfilled the promises to Abraham, what God wanted to do through Adam has been put back on the rails.” National Catholic Reporter, Interview with Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright of Durham, England, May 21, 2004 <http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/wright.htm>