

Is there love to be found in the Bible's teaching on sex?

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I think it's important to say at the outset that although I've written about some of these issues from the perspective of biblical law, which is one of my specialist areas within the University of Bristol, I'm speaking today in a personal capacity and my views shouldn't be taken to represent those of the University.

So, is the Bible's teaching on sex good news for Switzerland? Frankly, at first sight, the answer would seem to be no. And perhaps nowhere is the contrast between modern trends in Switzerland and biblical teaching greater than on the subject of same-sex marriage. The problem is that biblical law runs exactly counter to this by claiming not only that there are limits to people's ability to choose but that there are limits to sexual expression, both heterosexual and homosexual. And in some parts of the Bible, some of the punishments for sexual expression which take place outside the context of heterosexual marriage takes the form of the death penalty, which hardly seems to be good news for anybody!

On the face of it, the position of those who are campaigning in Switzerland for same-sex marriage seems perfectly reasonable. This is why many people are in favour of same-sex marriage, not only among those who self-identify as 'gay' but also among some of those who self-identify as 'straight'. And although some of us might find it hard to believe, there are plenty of reasons why many people support same-sex marriage, including increasing parts of the Christian church.

First of all we all agree, don't we, that there is something dehumanising about promiscuity. And so some people are in favour of same-sex marriage because it should reduce promiscuous behaviour. Another reason might be that same-sex marriage encourages faithfulness because it encourages people to commit to a single sexual partner. Thirdly, it could be argued from a policy point of view that same-sex marriages help to build social capital. If you can encourage people to take on obligations to one another so their burdens don't fall on the wider community, isn't that a good thing? If a woman says she's willing to look after her wheelchair-bound lesbian lover for the rest of the life, why wouldn't we want to make sure she has all the tax breaks that are available to married people? Fourthly, advocates of same-sex marriage say, the vast majority of people have heterosexual desires and many of them want to get married and the law allows them to do that. But, they say, we have same-sex desires and we want to get married as well and we're prevented from doing that. And so there is said to be a need to match the legal institution (in this case, marriage) to the sexual desire. The assumption is that heterosexual desires and homosexual desires are the same thing and so it's said that the legal institutions should be the same for both as well. It's a question of equality. And finally (as if all that wasn't enough!) the language of 'same-sex *marriage*' is a key term in the 'politics of recognition'. The word 'marriage' is a label or a signifier of social legitimacy, in a way that 'same-sex union' or 'same-sex partnership' is not. This is precisely why, when I was in South Africa a few years ago, there was a last-minute amendment to South Africa's Civil Unions Bill (which, in its original form simply provided for civil

unions) to allow not simply for same-sex civil unions but same-sex *marriage*. 'Marriage' is the 'magic word' because same-sex marriage is *not* simply about providing a legal framework (or dealing with a particular set of ideas about 'equality'). It's also about providing social legitimacy.

So these are the arguments that are being put forward by the advocates of same-sex marriage. We're told that it's all about love and equality and being inclusive and aren't these things that Christians should support? And if this is so, then opposing same-sex marriage just seems like the worst kind of narrow-minded prejudice.

Lev. 20. death penalty. West Wing quotes it as a knock down argument against bible and sex.

But as we engage with these arguments, we may find that what's missing from the debate is actually an understanding of sex and sexuality within the purposes of God. The problem is that we're not used to thinking theologically about sex. So when we're faced with the question 'what about same-sex marriage?' we struggle because we haven't got the context to put it in. The same is true in relation to some of the other presenting issues regarding sex and sexuality in Switzerland, whether we are talking about pornography, chatlines, the high levels of heterosexual promiscuity, and so on. And because we're not used to thinking theologically about sex, we've become more vulnerable to the moral crises of our age than we know, with the result that we find ourselves struggling with exactly the same issues within the church as well.

So the fact we're Christians doesn't mean we're exempt from having to navigate this territory! What makes it especially hard for us is that a lot of us think that the Bible is out to destroy people's enjoyment of life and to simply restrict their behaviour for the sake of it, including our sexual behaviour. The result is that God is often seen as part of the problem and not part of the solution. In Psalm 62:11-12 David says: "One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that You, O God, are strong, and that You, O LORD, are loving." Behind the question there is doubt about whether the Bible's teaching on sex is really good or not and this doubt is shared increasingly not only among the wider culture but also among Christians as well. In this particular area, it seems, we have doubt as to whether God is good and whether He is strong enough to enable us to follow through. And so some of us will have real difficulty in saying, in this area, "You, O God, are strong, and... You, O LORD, are loving". And this is a real problem for us because if we can't say that God is for us on this, very important, question then it really casts a shadow over other areas of our lives as well.

We've lost that sense that God is for us. That He is for us and not against us in the area of sex and sexuality and that He is part of the *solution* and not part of the problem.

So although we may be coming to this issue with all sorts of questions, I think that the most helpful thing that I can do in the next half hour or so is to try and set out something of a biblical theology of sex into which we can put whatever it is that

we are struggling with, whether it's with the culture, within our families and within our own lives. What I hope we'll find is that while we may need to change our behaviour in one way or another, there is good news for everybody in what the Bible teaches about sex and intimacy.

If we wanted to sketch the big picture about what the Bible teaches about sex and intimacy, it might go something like this: We live in a fallen world where we naturally tend to look to other people to meet the needs of our hearts instead of looking to God. The result is that sexual intimacy is always a rival to spiritual intimacy. This means that we are all caught up in various kinds of relational idolatry which means that there will be deep challenges for each one of us, regardless of our sexuality. The *only* form of sexual intimacy that is *potentially* safe for us is heterosexual marriage because this speaks of the character and work of God in ways that other forms of sexual relating do not. But whether we are married or single, we are all called to spiritual intimacy. Going to unpack this under three main headings:

PPT:

- (1) The lure of false sexual intimacy
- (2) The gift of true sexual intimacy
- (3) The call to spiritual intimacy

PPT: (1) The lure of false sexual intimacy

As we begin to unpack the question of whether the Bible's teaching on sex is good news for Switzerland we need to start by acknowledging, right at the outset, that there is a lot of pain around issues of sex and sexuality both within the church and in society at large. And wherever there is hurt and shame we're reminded that we live in a fallen world where not everything goes the way we wanted it to, or God wanted it to. What God wanted for us, in the area of our gender and our sexuality, was for us to know that we are each made either male or female in the image of God and that that was a wonderful thing and a splendid thing. We were supposed to have been able to say, as the Psalmist did, "... I am fearfully and wonderfully made... [and] I know that full well" (Psalm 139:14). That sense of being, and sense of gender being, was a very basic and legitimate need that should have been quietly met and set in us day by day. We should have grown up with that sense of quiet confidence about being either male or female; we should have felt good about it and it should have been a shining splendour in our hearts that gave glory to God.

However, we live in a fallen world and so we will have been brought up in a society and in families where our parents are not perfect and they in turn were brought up in societies and families where everything didn't go the way that God intended either. And so some of us will have never really connected well with our father so are actually the fatherless. And others of course may not have bonded well to their mother and so there will have been motherlessness. All of which means that some of the legitimate needs we will have had, like our sense of gender being, will have gone unmet. And these gaps will have left wounds of one sort or another and these wounds will often have led to sin of one kind or another. And so for many people in our society, and in the church, our gender and

our sexuality are not things that we feel good about: instead, they are a source of shame and pain and they are a liability.

The Fall will have affected each of us in different ways and so we will all live out gender and sexual brokenness to some degree. (And if we have any difficulty acknowledging that then we just need to spend a few moments thinking about how we compare with Jesus on those points!). So it's all a level playing-field before the Cross. And when the Fall lands in our lap it's a mistake to respond with anything other than the Cross or to try to correct it on our own. But the Fall has robbed us of our knowledge and experience of the full love of God and our ability to trust and rely on Him. So in our alienation and confusion we will instead have looked into ourselves and looked to another – even a stranger in the night – and tried to fix things on our own terms. This is why, when we read through the Bible we find that sexual intimacy is a rival to spiritual intimacy. At its worst it's a substitute because it becomes an alternative spiritual reality. Instead of finding our 'covering' in God, we'll have tried to make our own, very flimsy, coverings. As Isaiah says: "Their cobwebs are useless for clothing/ They cannot cover themselves with what they make" (Isaiah 59:6). We weave a web to ourselves but it doesn't do the job. We're still left with the pain, and the anxiety and the aloneness. Like the character of Blanche du Bois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* we find ourselves running "from one leaky roof to another leaky roof" because, as she says "it was storm – all storm, and I was – caught in the centre" [Scene Five, 169].

So we've both been sinned against and we've also sinned in our brokenness. Because we're made in the image of a God who is Trinity, and relational, we have a need to be known and loved for who we truly are. We have to bond with something and if we don't bond with God then we are going to bond with other things. When we try to fill our need for love with something or someone God has made rather than with God Himself, the Bible calls that 'idolatry'. And when we try to find salvation in the arms of another we can call that 'relational idolatry'. This is the lure of false sexual intimacy. Relational idolatry is what happens when we look to other people to meet the needs of our heart, instead of looking to God. It includes one-night stands, sleeping around and adulterous affairs. It also includes non-physical relationships, including pornography, chat-lines and eroticised day-dreaming because the desire is there, even if the physical connection isn't. At the end of the day, it's all about the idealising of another and making him or her the god or goddess who, we hope, will save us from our neediness. It's about searching for someone else to ease our anxiety, or our pain or our aloneness and so the dynamic is all about taking, not giving. It's about using a fellow glorious creature for our own ends. And since none of them can ease the aloneness that we feel, our idols end up becoming a burden to us ("a burden for the weary..."; Isaiah 46:1-2).

This is the context in which we need to locate the issue of same-sex marriage because, frankly, same-sex marriage isn't anything different. It's another form of relational idolatry. Where it's different from the heterosexual versions is that it's an attempt to try to find completion in a member of the same sex. And it's not hard to see why. We live in a fallen world and so, if we weren't given sufficient

affirmation of our gender being, or if that was taken from us in some way, we will have had a same-sex deficit and those needs may have become eroticised. And because God has made us to seek complementarity, we might have tried to meet those legitimate needs by seeking complementarity with people in our own gender group who we think have what we lack. It's another expression of relational idolatry.

And it's because we're all caught up relational idolatry in different ways that we have to be very careful how we express our concerns about same-sex marriage. We have to regard all the other heterosexual forms of relational idolatry as being just as serious distortions of the image of God as same-sex marriage, whether it's idolatrous promiscuity, idolatrous divorces and idolatrous re-marriages. Commentators who self-identify as 'gay' ask why the Christian church is so quick to condemn same-sex marriage but slow to question heterosexual rates of promiscuity, divorce and remarriage. They say: *we'll* repent of same-sex marriages when *you* repent of what Jesus calls adulterous marriages. They say: why are you, the church, holding us to a standard of sexual propriety when you're turning a blind eye to what is difficult for you? They are absolutely right. Why is there a double-standard going on here? Could it be that we regard the sins we're *not* tempted to do as being less serious than the ones we *are* tempted to do? If so, do we think we are in the business of selecting sinners? We'll have you, you and you but not you! If so, we are being led by our prejudice and not by God and our protests will seem smug and self-righteous.

Where there is gender and sexual distortion it goes to the jugular of God. Because we're not imaging God to the world and to each other. We rob God of His glory and we rob ourselves of our true identities. There's a lot of talk, isn't there, about identity-theft as a twenty-first century crime. But being robbed of our gender and sexual identities could actually be the biggest form of 'identity theft' there is! In that sense, same-sex marriage is a prophetic call to the church because it shows us that things are amiss. We are losing the glory of our gender and we are robbing God of His glory.

To sum up, we live in a fallen world where we naturally tend to look to other people to meet the needs of our hearts instead of looking to God. The result is that sexual intimacy is always a rival to spiritual intimacy. This means that we are all caught up in relational idolatry at some level which means that there are deep challenges for each one of us, regardless of our sexuality.

[PPT:] (2) The call to true sexual intimacy

If it is the case that sexual intimacy is always a rival to spiritual intimacy, this raises the question: is there ever a context in which it is safe for us to have a sexual relationship? The answer is yes: and this is heterosexual marriage. This brings us to an important question in relation to same-sex marriage which is: why do Christians think that the *only* proper context for sexual relating is faithful, heterosexual marriage? After all, men and women who self-identify as 'gay' can be just as faithful as those who self-identify as 'straight'. In fact, it's not hard to point to some same-sex relationships that have lasted a lot longer than some heterosexual relationships. In the light of this, isn't the whole idea of 'Christian

marriage' just a case of plonking down the goalposts somewhere that happens to suit the majority who are 'heterosexist'?

Well, no. There is a very good reason why heterosexual marriage is the only safe place to have a sexual relationship and it is because heterosexual marriage speaks of the character and work of God in ways that other forms of sexual relating do not. Heterosexual marriage is a call to true sexual intimacy because it's the only sexual relationship that speaks the truth about God.

Why is that? This is because we understand who God is from the Bible which reveals God as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. [Rublev picture]. The Trinity is a picture of perfect receptivity and activity with each Person giving to and receiving from the other in love. It's a picture of security, contentment and openness. It is, in fact, a picture of true intimacy. At the same time, however, the three Persons are not three clones (which is where the Rublev picture lets us down!). They are three differentiated Persons and different roles are associated with each. The Trinity is a mystery, of course, but the amazing thing is that there is one analogy for the Trinity in the Bible and this is the creation of humanity as male and female. 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' (Genesis 1:27). So gender is a key part of what it means to be made in the image of God. It's as if God needed two sexes to bear the image of God because it's too much to be put into just one gender. And since it is the case that man and woman *together* convey the image and likeness of God, it follows also that gender complementarity is key to what it means to be human. There is something about the difference between male and female that makes complementariness possible and this somehow echoes the deep mystery of relationships within the Trinity. This is one of the reasons why heterosexual marriage is said to be a gift from God. It is revelatory because when gender differentiation is brought together in marriage, it models something about the Trinity.

This is the reason why heterosexual marriage is understood to be the only safe form of sexual relating because it's the only kind that reflects the character of God. In fact, you could say that every departure from the ideal of marriage misses an important aspect of the truth about God and in that sense it tells a lie about God. So promiscuity ignores God's faithfulness. Same-sex marriage ignores complementarity. Pornography ignores personal contact and so on. This is why sexual expression outside heterosexual marriage is such a cheat. It doesn't bring us any real satisfaction because it's based on a lie. It's not revelatory. It doesn't tell us the truth about God and so we are left with the need and the loneliness is still there. The only form of sexual intimacy that can bring us any satisfaction is heterosexual marriage because it is a picture of the character and purpose of God. And of course the purpose of God is that the church would be presented to Christ as His Bride (Ephesians 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."). So there is not only the question of God's *character* in terms of God's internal relationship, there is also the question of God's *purpose vis a vis* humanity.

Does this mean then that sexual intimacy in heterosexual marriage can *never* be a rival to spiritual intimacy? No. It *can* be a rival, not least in the sin of uxoriousness (now there's a word to conjure with!). Uxoriousness is the sin of giving excessive attention to your wife (if you're a husband). It's a form of relational idolatry within marriage. We might think of the 'trophy wife' or 'trophy husband' who becomes an object of worship. So heterosexual marriage *can* be a rival for spiritual intimacy. (St. Paul recognises this in 1 Corinthians 7:5 where married partners abstain from sex in order to devote themselves to prayer). The big difference between heterosexual marriage and all the other forms of sexual relating is that whilst all the others are *automatically* rivals to spiritual intimacy – and can never be anything other than a rival to spiritual intimacy – heterosexual marriage is *not* always a rival to spiritual intimacy. On the contrary, heterosexual marriage has a unique power to reveal the character and the truth of God. Same-sex marriages do not. So heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage can't be put in the same box.

I'm going to draw to a close shortly, so let's sum up where we've got to. We've seen that we live in a fallen world where we naturally tend to look to other people to meet the needs of our hearts instead of looking to God. The result is that sexual intimacy is always a rival to spiritual intimacy. This means that we are all caught up in various kinds of relational idolatry which means that there will be deep challenges for each one of us, regardless of our sexuality. The *only* form of sexual intimacy that is *potentially* safe for us is heterosexual marriage because this speaks of the character and work of God in ways that other forms of sexual relating do not.

But although heterosexual marriage is the only form of sexual intimacy that can bring us any real satisfaction, Jesus frankly acknowledges that it isn't going to be for everyone. Everyone who *can* respond to the call of marriage should do so but there are plenty of reasons for celibacy (see Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:10-12 for example). In fact, if we put that alongside Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 there's even an argument for saying that celibacy is not exceptional. If you don't receive the call of marriage, and you embrace the call of singleness instead, then of course you're going to be celibate. Celibacy is OK.

But even though we may not receive the call of marriage we are *all* called – without exception – to spiritual intimacy. This brings me onto the last point, which I'm only going to touch on briefly.

[PPT:] (3) The call to spiritual intimacy

Leanne Payne says: "We do not know who we are and will search for an identity in someone or something other than God until we find ourselves in Him". So really 'same-sex marriage' is just the presenting issue. The real issue is our need for spiritual intimacy. We are not all called to heterosexual marriage, celibacy is OK and we don't need sex to lead full and complete lives in the image of God. Ask Jesus. What we *are* called to, each of one us, is not sexual intimacy but spiritual intimacy. So the issue is not simply 'what about same-sex marriage?', though I'm glad we've talked about that. It's 'what about me?' and 'how am I going to receive God's call to spiritual intimacy?'

Because this is really the crunch issue. The reason why same-sex marriage is such a politically explosive issue is because we have a worldview that says marriage and sex are where human beings find their ultimate fulfilment. So of course opposing same-sex marriage seems like a terrible thing to say. But part of the reason we're in this bind is because the church has raised marriage to a place where it ought not to be and Western culture has raised sex to a place which it not ought to occupy. In a culture as highly sexualised as ours we simply assume that sexual intimacy must always be more fulfilling than the spiritual (although Boy George once declared that he preferred a good cup of tea to sex). We overrate sexuality and don't understand what we're missing. [PPT: Shapiro]. Aaron Shapiro confidently asserted: "We firmly believe that there is more to life than money, beer and sex. We just don't know what it is". More and more of us share this confusion. And yet what we are saying in this debate, if we are saying anything, is nailing the lie that sex is all there is. Spirituality is more fulfilling than sex.

As C. S. Lewis says in *The Weight of Glory*: "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased." So our desires are not too strong, but too weak (Lewis). We need to see the object of greater desire. And God meets us at the level of our lesser desires to lead us onto true desire, which is intimacy with Him.

PPT: Perhaps at this conference, as part of our engaging and reflecting on these issues would can the opportunity to check out where we are before the LORD and what we're carrying in our hearts. Because however much we would like everything to be resolved in the here and now we are all a 'work in progress'. We are still in a process of becoming and we are both saint and sinner at the same time. We need to acknowledge all this for ourselves before we can begin to ask it of others. We need to acknowledge before God and before appropriate others the ways in which we ourselves fall short and are in need of redemption. Sin is any point at which I have failed to live out of my true self.

So, for some of us we might need to repent before the LORD of the ways in which we've allowed sexual intimacy to rival spiritual intimacy, whether that's been in marriage or outside it. We might need to repent of the various ways in which we've tried to ease our anxiety and aloneness through another human being instead of God. And we might need to recognise the limitations of the things we might be caught up in and start acknowledging the ways in which it is a lie. Is this thing in my right hand a lie? (Isa. 44:20) [explain]. The right hand is the dominant hand: it is the hand of strength, choice and action. Can we not see that it is ashes and that there is no real nourishment or satisfaction to be found there? And that it is a lie because it doesn't tell us the truth about God? Some of us will have compromised the truth because we didn't want to be alone. And if that's the case then we come before the Cross and make an exchange, of lies for truth. And God will call out the true self from under the covering of idols.

And for some of us we might be very aware of where we've been wounded and where we've sinned in our woundedness. And as we confess our sin before the LORD and allow Him to speak truth to our hearts we can get down to where we've been hurt and allow the LORD to bring healing there. God says through Isaiah: "Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the Name of the LORD and rely on His God" (Isaiah 50:10-11). For some of us we may be feeling like a small child, in the dark and very much alone. We've not had that light in our hearts or that affirmation about who we are. There is no shining splendour regarding the goodness of our gender or our sexuality. In fact, there might only be a glimmer. We might want to confess before the LORD that we simply don't know what it means, truly, to be made in the image of God as male and female. That we don't know what it means, deep down in our hearts, what it means to have been fathered or mothered. So if there is no shining splendour in our hearts regarding the good of our gender, or our sexuality, then the LORD says: 'Trust in Me. Come and get that from Me. Don't light your own fires and don't try to find it a fellow creature who can give you no real support. Rely on Me.'

And still others of us may need to receive something else from the LORD. Whatever it is, the LORD has a word of spiritual intimacy to give each one of us at this conference. As we receive that word, we'll find that we are so much more than just our brokenness and that God has so much more to show us of who He is and who He has created us to be. And in this way we can begin to find that God is for us and not against us, that He is good, that He is strong and, yes, that there is good news in the Bible regarding sex and intimacy.