**Same-Sex Relationships: Asking the Bible for Answers to Questions It Does Not Ask**

**A Response to Sherwood Lingenfelter’s Paper, “Gay and Lesbian Christians”**

In his paper, my colleague and friend Sherwood Lingenfelter twice refers to my views, and it amuses me to note that there is some tension between the two references. The first speaks of a “persuasive argument against same-sex marriage.” The second notes that in asking the Bible about same-sex relationships in the form in which we need to discuss them in our culture, we are asking a question that the Bible does not ask.

As an Episcopalian and a Californian, I live in a cultural context in which it is simply assumed that same-sex relationships are just as moral and natural and good as heterosexual relationships, but the argument that goes with that first reference makes me unable and unwilling simply to assimilate to my culture. With regard to the second reference, one could add to this comment the fact that the Bible nevertheless does suggest a framework for thinking about a question such as this one that it does not discuss. It does so when it distinguishes, on the one hand, between the way things were by God’s creation design and, on the other hand, the way Scripture’s instructions also make allowance for human stubbornness (e.g., Matt. 19:1–9). It is a framework that Jesus relates to a question that people did ask in his day, the question of the propriety of divorce, and one we might consider in relation to questions we need to ask.

**The Creation Ideal in a Stubborn World**

Over the past century or two, the church has faced a number of tricky questions about the relationship between God’s creation ideal for marriage and the way things are in a stubborn world. As well as the questions of divorce and same-sex relationships, there are also the questions of polygamy and the deliberate avoidance of procreation. All four fall short of the creation vision in Genesis. In general, Western Christians are horrified by polygamy; Protestant Christians take birth control for granted and do not look askance at the idea of a couple’s avoiding having children; and we go through the motions of being horrified about divorce, but generally welcome divorced and remarried Christians into the fellowship of the church without asking too many questions. But evangelical Christians in the West are in a turmoil over same-sex relationships.

Genesis points towards a marriage relationship that involves one man and one woman for life in a relationship that will generate children. All four of the issues I have noted involve relationships that fall short of God’s creation ideal at some point. Yet we treat them very differently. I am especially struck that the issue the New Testament most explicitly discusses, divorce and remarriage, is the one over which Christian attitudes have most remarkably changed over the past fifty years or so. The change has come about not as a result of more careful attention to Scripture, but because the church regularly adjusts to cultural realities. I am vaguely aware that there has been considerable missiological reflection on attitudes toward polygamy. I do not know if there has been similar reflection on divorce and remarriage. Perhaps such reflection would help us to think about same-sex relationships.

**Guidelines for Thinking about Tricky Moral Questions**

As well as commenting about the difference between God’s creation vision and the way Scripture makes allowance for human stubbornness, Jesus has some other guidelines for thinking about tricky moral questions. One of them is his observation that the entirety of the Torah and the Prophets is an exposition of love for God and love for one’s neighbor. One can see how the rule about divorce illustrates this principle as well as the stubbornness principle. In a world gone awry, marriages break down, and in particular, men throw their wives out because they are tired of them or because they cannot have children. In a traditional society this action leaves the wife in a vulnerable position, without anywhere to live, without means of survival, and without any documentation of her position. The rule about divorce papers provides her with some evidence of her status, and is thus both a concession to human stubbornness and an expression of love.

A question Lingenfelter’s essay raises is whether there could be some equivalent proper expression of love toward those who are attracted to people of the same sex. I understand that some states have two forms of marriage, regular marriage and covenant marriage. The terms are rather odd, as one would have thought that all marriage was covenantal, but the distinctiveness of covenantal marriage is that the couple forgo (much of) their right to divorce. I have heard it suggested that we need to broaden the idea of two forms of marriage. There could be marriage —with the potential to match the creation ideal—between two people of the opposite sex who do not have a former partner still living and who are open to having children, and aother form of marriage for people who lack one of these elements. I cannot see, however, any way in which we can simply agree with the culture that same-sex marriage is just as good as heterosexual marriage.

**Questioning Assumptions**

My final comment is as follows. In a panel discussion at Fuller Theological Seminary, I was once asked what I thought was the biggest thing to be wary about at seminary. I said “sex.” The questioner responded with a follow-up query that indicated his assumption that I was referring to same-sex relationships. I was not. I was referring to the fact that our culture assumes that there is nothing wrong about consensual sex between a single man and a single woman, and that Christian young people commonly make the same assumption. They do not see any harm in sexual relationships between single people. That assumption seems to me a much more important issue than same-sex relations. “The Bible contains six admonishments to homosexuals and three hundred and sixty-two admonishments to heterosexuals. That doesn’t mean that God doesn’t love heterosexuals. It’s just that they need more supervision” (a comment from the cover of Lynne Lavner’s album *Butch Fatale*).