

Rodborough Tabernacle:

Why we registered for Same Sex Marriage

The United Reformed Church has allowed same sex wedding ceremonies to take place in its churches since 2016, with individual churches given the opportunity to discuss whether they would like to offer this service to their community or not.

On Sunday March 26th 2023 the church voted by an 80% majority in favour of welcoming same sex couples to marry at Rodborough Tabernacle. This was not to conform to societal expectations and see it as a quick fix to grow our church, but purely and simply because we believe that is what Jesus wants.

We believe he would want to support committed faithful loving relationships between two people, supremely expressed in the covenant of marriage, as this reflects the faithful love of God for us. That is the heart for what marriage is all about, regardless of what the sexuality of those two people are. We all know how important a committed loving relationship is for our wellbeing and prosperity. The majority of course will be heterosexual couples, but God's rich diversity means that we are all different, beautifully so. Jesus went out of his way to include those of his day that the majority excluded because they thought they were different - think women, tax collectors, Gentiles, lepers. Jesus showed love and grace and inclusion towards them. Because Jesus is Lord, he shapes our attitude to others. We bow the knee to him and we believe he would be passionate about making a fair and equal society where all people are treated with respect and dignity.

We are tackling this topic because we come to a crucial moment for the life of this church as we consider our purpose and future direction. Do we embody Christ, do we point to his healing, reconciling and liberating work if we continue to deny committed couples the opportunity to be married before God in our church?

A recent survey of young people aged 16-25 reported that when asked what comes into their mind when they think about church, the overwhelming response was 'anti - gay' and 'prejudiced/bigots'.

Our perceived stance on sex and gays is a real gospel issue and it seems to be preventing people from hearing that gospel.

Whilst the Conservative Party realised nearly 20 years ago that the equal treatment of gay people had become a litmus test of basic human decency, and changed its view, it is a test that the church seems to be spectacularly failing in. This is our opportunity to make a small move to put that right.

In the [2021 Census 89.4%](#) of people across England and Wales identified as straight or heterosexual and the trend is for that figure to be falling. Being a member of a minority community however, still bears a cost. In society we tend to attack what we do not understand and what is outside of our experience. A [UK Govt survey](#) showed that more than two thirds of LGBT respondents avoided holding hands with a same-sex partner for fear of a negative reaction from others and at least 2 in 5 respondents had experienced an incident because they were LGBT, such as verbal harassment or physical violence, in the 12 months preceding the survey. However, more than 9 in 10 of the most serious incidents went unreported, often because respondents thought 'it happens all the time'.

For those of us who are straight, could we imagine the sense of injustice at that.

In the classic novel *Noughts and Crosses* author Malorie Blackman creates a world where white people are treated as inferior and are on the receiving end of racism. Those of us who are straight need to imagine similarly how it might feel to experience being marginalised simply as a result of the heterosexuality God created us with.

What Does the Bible Say?

If you would prefer to watch videos on this matter we would recommend taking a look at a website created by New Testament lecturer Revd Dr Jonathan Tallon <https://www.bibleandhomosexuality.org/> which has a number of clear and helpful videos aimed at everyday Christians.

Most people do not follow through consistently with their claim that scripture is at every point inerrant and binding. It is puzzling why some regard the scriptural prohibitions of same-sex intercourse as binding simply because they are in scripture and yet pass over, or relativise the prohibitions of say women preachers, or regulations regarding hairstyle (1 Cor 11, 1 Tim 2) or the limited grounds for divorce and remarriage.

Leviticus

The Levitical prohibition against homosexuality (Lev 20) is set within what is known as the 'holiness code' which sets out to ensure that the Hebrew people stay distinct from their pagan neighbours with their practices of using male shrine prostitutes. It comes alongside men being forbidden to have sex with a menstruating woman, to say nothing about eating shellfish (Lev 11). Furthermore, Leviticus does not simply say homosexuality is wrong but that homosexuals should be put to death. On what grounds do we follow the prohibition but not the penalty? You can't claim just to follow a biblical injunction simply because it's in scripture and then be selective in what you take from scripture. Yet many biblical conservatives do just this, while at the same time condemning those who accept same sex marriage as 'getting round the plain meaning of scripture' or 'capitulating to the spirit of the age'.

Some argue that we should take the overall thrust of scripture which I think is a good thing. What was Jesus doing – he came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. He challenged those purity taboos – reaching out to those who had been excluded and denied access to God and a place in God's people. Revisions need not be defensive. The great themes of scripture are covenant love, flourishing, wholeness, grace and divine impartiality rather than ostracization and condemnation.

Sodom (Genesis 19) – the sin committed was the intent to gang rape male visitors by a majority of presumably heterosexual men. Interestingly, the homosexual element in the act held no particular interest to the author (the violation of hospitality would have counted far worse a category of crime cf. Matthew 10.14-15 where Jesus uses the example of Sodom in the context of the gospel not being welcomed in certain towns and villages). This story reveals how preserving male sexual domination was an absolute goal both for the baying mob who wanted to humiliate the guests and for Lot who was prepared to sacrifice his daughters to mass rape to prevent his guests being treated in such a way.

As Jonathan Tallon points out, what mattered was not your gender, but your status and power: "The ancient world didn't categorise sexuality by who you had sex with, but whether you were the active, dominant partner or the passive, submissive partner."

How valid do we think this mindset is today? Inspired by Jesus we need to be on guard against any tendency to believe that one person should be afforded more dignity than another.

Jesus –There is nothing in the gospels which speaks directly about being gay.

Let's look at Jesus talking about marriage. The passage comes from Matthew 19 (there is a similar account in Mark 10). Jesus is asked how easy divorce should be. This was a current debate – one school of thought arguing that a man should be able to divorce his wife for any reason at all, whereas another school argued that he should only be able to divorce her in cases of sexual immorality.

Jesus responds by going back to the account in Genesis: God made them male and female; for this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

Let us be absolutely clear here – Jesus is addressing the *permanence* of marriage, not *who* you can marry. Of course, Jesus talks about male and female – both he and his hearers lived in a world where that's who got married. In contrast, and in Judaism at the time, same-sex marriage would not have been even a glimmer on the horizon of their conversation.

So, the passage addresses directly whether marriage should be lifelong, not whether same-sex marriages can be honouring to God. Jesus strongly affirms traditional marriage, but he doesn't therefore condemn all alternatives, including celibacy.

The passage does not deal with same-sex marriage, and any attempts to make it so are arguing, again speculatively, from silence.

These verses need careful unpacking and handling. Many protestant churches hold that, in certain circumstances, remarriage after divorce is possible, and I agree with that.

But you can't go from nuanced interpretations about the permanence of marriage, which the passage addresses directly, and then use the same passage as a blunt instrument to condemn same-sex marriage, which the passage doesn't address directly. It smacks of double standards.

Paul – in 1 Cor 6.9 and 1 Tim 1.10 there are lists of sins including a rare word with unclear meaning which is sometimes translated as *homosexuals or sodomites*. The elements of 'male' and 'bed' are present in the word but in its early usage outside of the Bible it was largely included in lists of economic vices and may therefore refer to using male prostitutes. In Paul's society exploitation in the form of prostitution and pederasty (Greek pupil - tutor relationship between teenager and older man) were the most common form of male-male sex and likely to be in Paul's mind.

At the time of Paul writing to the Romans a freeborn man would have to act as a dominant, active partner in any sexual encounter to maintain his status and honour and likewise a woman would have to be the passive, submissive partner. Slaves and prostitutes had no honour to violate so sex with them did not count as adultery and so entrenched was this view that churches had to work hard to explain that sleeping with a prostitute and then your wife was a sin. Romans 1.18ff Paul argues against the idolatry of the Gentiles in a passage which can be read as condemning the worship of fertility goddesses with sexual acts including priestesses penetrating men with phalluses. What is clear is that Paul's reference to what is 'natural' in verses 26-27 is formed in a culture highly distinct from our own today and making direct parallels is unlikely to be faithful to the original meaning. Our reading of these ancient texts can say far more about us and our conditioning than it does about the

texts themselves. The way we read them is profoundly shaped by the traditions within which we have been raised, our culture, and our personal experiences through life.

Romans 1

A flagship for those who argue that same sex relationships go against God's will.

See Jonathon's Tallon's in-depth biblical analysis of understanding this crucial passage. [Condemned or not? St Paul, Romans and homosexuality | Bible and Homosexuality](#)

He concludes by saying:

Any interpretation of Romans 1:

- has to make sense of Paul's Jewish background;
- it has to have Paul criticising practices that are identified with pagans, not Jews;
- it should fit in with Paul's argument about idolatry;
- and account for Paul naming females first; and ideally, it should match the earliest Christian understandings of Romans.

The idea that Paul was writing about people who are lesbians and gays fails at numerous points. No-one, Jewish or pagan, categorised sexuality this way; it doesn't account for females being named first; and it doesn't match early Christian understandings.

The idea that Paul was writing about female and male same-sex activity, not orientation, is stronger.

It makes sense of Paul's Jewish background, and pederasty was associated with gentile rather than Jewish practice, although this is not particularly true of female same-sex activity. It sort of fits Paul's argument from idolatry, if you see it as a distortion of the creation in Genesis. It doesn't explain why females are mentioned first by Paul, and this interpretation of Romans can't be found amongst Christian writings until the late fourth century.

What about Paul referring to females having unnatural intercourse with males, and pederasty?

This fits Paul's Jewish background, and uses accusations that are specific to pagans. It also fits with Paul's argument about idolatry, and makes some sense of females being named first – Paul is starting with male-female unnatural intercourse before moving to male-male pederasty. This interpretation also fits in with references to Romans in early Christian writings from the second century onwards.

But could Paul have been talking about pagan goddess worship? It fits Paul's Jewish background, uses accusations that are closely linked to pagans (particularly in Rome), is continuing the theme of idolatry, makes sense of why females, the priestesses, are named first, and matches the earliest Christian writings on Romans.

What may have seemed a plain meaning of Paul's letter to ancient hearers can be obscured to us because their world is different from ours.

But if Paul is condemning pederasty, or idolatrous, ecstatic orgiastic, self-harming pagan goddess worship, that's quite different from loving, committed, faithful relationships.

There is the argument about Creation and natural law.

Biblical argument from creation: what is the purpose of sex? What was the will of God in creating male and female? The primary reason is not procreation but because it was not good for Adam to be alone. Companionship is the main part of God's plan in creation. Childbirth is an afterthought as part of Eve's punishment. Jesus and Paul stress the quality of relationship in marriage but don't mention childbirth.

For Paul - sexual union always has spiritual consequences whether for good or for ill. Promiscuous sexual activity involves desecration of the body which is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6.15-20). Where sexual union expresses mutual love and commitment it becomes a 'mysterion' (Eph 5.32) a holy mystery or sacrament reflecting the union of Christ and the church. A channel of love and grace.

Tradition is a mixed blessing. It can anchor you to the past but as Reformers we well know that we shouldn't give tradition the veto over the moving of the Spirit. Tradition cannot be a criterion of truth since we worship God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Our tradition is a living one ever changing as the world changes. There is always more light and truth to come from God's word otherwise we stifle the prophetic.

Natural law arguments, the Catholic Church arguments, is that procreation is primary or at least an essential intended end of sexual relations and any that are not open to procreation are against the natural law. Hence no contraception. Most Protestants seem to believe that sex should serve the expression and enjoyment of a relationship of love and commitment even if the possibility of procreation is prevented. No one would suggest that an infertile couple are not married. So therefore where is the difference in moral status between that relationship between an infertile couple and a gay relationship?

Natural argument is that it's 'natural' for a man and woman to fall in love. Yet history shows us how those in the dominating sector of society defines themselves as 'normal' and 'natural', universalising from their own viewpoint and excluding other experiences of life. In recent years many have come to see how wrong and damaging such attitudes have been in relation to race, gender, ability and sexuality. Gay partnerships are experienced as being absolutely natural. We are constantly revising and adapting what is natural and normal for a greater good.

God's will?

John Bell said at Greenbelt that despite the fervent prayers of millions of fundamentalist Christians, God continues to create millions of gay people. Maybe we are not being open to how God wishes to bless us with the gift he is offering to us through gay people?

Does all this threaten social order and the fabric of society and marriage itself? It seems illogical. In what possible sense does a gay couple making lifelong vows to one another threaten or destabilise heterosexual couples who do the same? Theologically and socially the acceptance of same sex partners in covenant relationships does not overturn the institution of marriage and the family. Arguably it affirms it by extending it. At a pragmatic level society benefits when people are committed to caring for one another and are not left alone and reliant on the state. As a church we do not condone promiscuity. We want to hold out to people, gay and straight, the ideal of faithful permanent committed relationships because we believe generally speaking, that they offer the best environment to grow and be fulfilled. A lot of Christians are appalled when they see the promiscuous and sexually open antics of straight and gay people alike. Yet for years same sex couples were denied

the opportunity to commit to one another in marriage, and as we know, it is still not possible for a same sex couple to marry in the Church of England.

Can social order exist with much diversity? Indeed it can and does exist with much diversity and that can give our society richness. And importantly a freedom, a freedom of expression and authenticity – to be who you are.

Why can't married heterosexual partnerships and gay partnerships co-exist and mutually support each other?

Can we respect the liberty of others we may disagree with? Some traditionalists accept the liberty to believe in and practice the headship of man over woman. They claim this liberty yet deny gay partners a similar liberty to follow their Christian conscience and conviction. Great are the Christian themes of liberty of conscience and of the freedom of the people of God. Can we respect those who differ from us? If the church is to be the church of the whole people of God it needs to be enriched by gay people. The church needs gay people as much as gay people need the church.

Ideologically there is no difference between civil partnership and marriage since both rests on covenant promise of permanent and exclusive commitment between two people. Popular instinct agrees calling civil partnership 'gay marriage'. Many feel however that the official distinction in terms signifies and perpetuates discrimination in status with marriage the gold standard and civil partnership something less. So, campaigners want it to be called marriage to be seen to be equal, equally holy, equally a gift and vocation from God to those who are called to it.

What makes marriage sacramental is its nature as a faithful covenant which expresses God's likeness in us and reflects the love between Christ and his church.

The Church's opposition to gay marriage is we believe having a detrimental effect on our mission and the hearing of the gospel. One final story – again told by Tony Campolo at Greenbelt. Campolo told how recently in the State of California – proposition 8 was to be voted on by the population. It was an attempt to take away from gay people certain rights and privileges that the courts had previously given them. Evangelicals believed that gays had no right to marry and churches organised themselves to campaign to take the right away from them. 1000s of volunteers knocked on doors - not to tell them about Jesus and love of God but to get them to vote against gays. They spent over 82 million dollars for ads on TV and media to vote against gays. Day after election the evangelicals were clapping hands. We won we won they shouted. But what did they win asked Campolo? Did Harry and Bob not climb into bed that night? Did Mandy and Linda not regard themselves as married because proposition 8 had been passed. Nothing had changed. But what had changed was that the following weekend thousands of gays marched streets in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and other cities screaming their hatred of the church as if the Bible was written to beat them into submission and Jesus was the enemy. Campolo said 'if you call that winning, you and I are not on same page. They thought they had won but they had actually lost.'

Conclusion

We want to be a church that is known for its compassion and love, a church that includes not excludes, a church that points people in the right way to find that fulfilling perfect love that casts out fear and brings people together in commitment and faithfulness. That is why we registered this church to perform same sex marriages as a sign that we wish to include all and accept all, as a reflection of our walking the way of Jesus and inspired by the love of God for all God's children.

