

# HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE IN THE LIGHT OF THE SCRIPTURES<sup>1</sup>

---

A discussion by Dr Barry Chant, DipEd, BA (hons), BD, DMin, PhD, Cert IV WPT.

On 8 March, 2012, an earnest 22-year-old American named Matthew Vines delivered an address entitled *The Bible and Homosexuality*.<sup>2</sup> The video of this address caught on. Within six months of being on YouTube, it was viewed 350,000 times, generated nearly 7,000 comments and was translated into six different languages, including French, German and Spanish, with Japanese, Korean and Arabic versions in preparation. Churches as far away as Australia and South Africa held public screenings and Vines was invited to speak at churches across the USA.<sup>3</sup>

In a *Huffington Post* article, Vines said, 'I love God. I also happen to be gay. In a better world this would be no more interesting or noteworthy to people than loving God and happening to love, say, cheesecake. But of course we all know that that isn't the world we live in. And for some reason, a lot of people have a big problem with anyone who believes in God and is gay.'<sup>4</sup>

The video purports to be primarily an examination of the biblical texts on homosexuality, but its strongest appeal is to the emotions. In both the introduction and the conclusion, Vines attempts to tug strongly at the heart strings. While he quite properly raises the issue of an inexcusable lack of understanding and tolerance on the part of others, many of his comments are also misleading.

## Myth #1: All homosexuals want long-term relationships

Time and again, Vines talks about long-term, faithful homosexual relationships and of the longing for security and family that he claims all homosexuals feel. However, statistics show clearly that the majority of male homosexuals do not feel this way. Only a small percentage actually want long-term partnerships.<sup>5</sup> Statistics also show that promiscuity is rife among male homosexuals with some claiming as many as 1000 different partners over a relatively short time. Others speak of four or five partners in a single night. The cry for same-sex marriage is more a cry for community acceptance than for long-term alliances. Further, there is little discussion about how a family can be created by a same-sex couple.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper first published in *VoxBrief*, Adelaide: Family Voice, November 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Vines, *The Gay Debate: the Bible and Homosexuality* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation\\_id=annotation\\_990127&feature=iv&src\\_vid=iAXClz\\_ae1E&v=ezQjNJUSraY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_990127&feature=iv&src_vid=iAXClz_ae1E&v=ezQjNJUSraY). Transcript at <http://matthewvines.tumblr.com/post/19110639328/the-gay-debate-the-bible-and-homosexuality>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/fashion/matthew-vines-wont-rest-in-defending-gay-christians.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/fashion/matthew-vines-wont-rest-in-defending-gay-christians.html?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup> M. Vines, 'The Bible and Homosexuality: Why I Left College and Spent Two Years Finding Out What the Scriptures Really Say,' *Huffingtonpost.com*, 26/3/12, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-vines/bible-homosexuality\\_b\\_1378368.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-vines/bible-homosexuality_b_1378368.html).

<sup>5</sup> Laumann, *The Social Organisation of Sexuality*, 26; McWhirter and Mattison, *The Male Couple: How Relationships Develop*, 1984:253-253; Wiedernan, 'Extramarital Sex,' 170.

<sup>6</sup> *Comparing the Lifestyles of Homosexual Couples to Married Couples*, <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=IS04C02>; Gilles Bernheim, *Homosexual Marriage, Parenting, and Adoption*, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/02/homosexual-marriage-parenting-and-adoption>; Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but not Affirming* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998; personal interview with a former homosexual, 28 May, 2013.

## **Myth #2: Homosexuality is innate**

There is also an underlying assumption that homosexuality is innate. While there is recognised evidence that circumstances can influence a person's development sexually, there is no evidence that people are born homosexual. Studies of identical twins indicate that same-sex attraction is not caused by genes or hormones in the womb.<sup>7</sup> And whatever circumstances we face in life, we do make choices about how we will respond to them.

Further, it is helpful to remember that there are many other people who would love to marry and have a family but cannot do so because of factors such as injury, poor health, mental issues, imprisonment, disfigurement, cultural barriers and the like. Clearly, the greatest compassion must be shown to such people, and every effort made to help them overcome those difficulties either by bringing about change or by assisting them to accept their situation with fortitude. Homosexuals face a similar situation but they are not the only ones who do.

People of the same sex may live together if they choose. There is no law against this and neither should there be. Because of over 80 pieces of recent legislation in this country, all couples who live together, whether married or not, have equal social and legal benefits. But the reality is that no matter what the law may say two people of the same sex cannot actually marry: they cannot engage in sexual intimacy in the way our bodies are created and designed and they cannot conceive a baby. This is not discrimination: it is simply the way things are.

To say this is not to lack compassion. It is an awful thing to experience loneliness and frustration. It is important to hear the heart-cry of people like Vines. But the answer is not found in giving in to one's yearning for sexual fulfilment any more than it would be for alcoholics or addicts to give in to their craving for physical gratification. Freedom is found in breaking the pattern, not yielding to it. Genuine compassion takes this position.

Vines claims that the idea of sexual orientation is a relatively recent one. There is no argument with this, although his references to history are few and selective. The reason is that homosexual lifestyle has most commonly been seen in history as a behavioural deviation which is the result of choice. People were not identified as homosexual or heterosexual; they were simply men and women who chose to express their sexuality in a certain way. The writings of sages like Plato make this clear. As far as I can see, even those who saw homosexual intimacy as better or more noble than heterosexual intimacy, as does Plato, still presented it as an option to be chosen rather than an inevitable destiny.

### **What do the Scriptures teach?**

Now to the Scriptures. Vines points out that all the relevant biblical passages appear negative towards homosexual practice and he tries hard to reinterpret them. His approach is clear and well developed, but the fact is that his exegesis is flawed. It is worth mentioning that it takes a bold man to challenge the scholarship of nearly two thousand years of theological exposition. To do so, you need to uncover exceptional scholarship and research. Vines does not accomplish this.

### **Matthew 7:17-18.**

*A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Vines's exegesis of this passage seems plausible but it is less than satisfactory. He argues that since a good tree brings good consequences, good teachings cannot be destructive of human dignity and self-worth. Because traditional teaching on the subject of homosexuality has been hurtful, it cannot be from a 'good tree'. However, this assumes a too narrow view of

---

<sup>7</sup> See 'Are Homosexuals Born That Way?' *VoxBrief*, Adelaide: Family Voice, February 2012.

terms like ‘good’ and ‘dignity’. The adjective ‘good’ does not necessarily mean ‘pleasant’. Sometimes what is good may be decidedly unpleasant—as in the case of painful surgery or tough discipline. Similarly, ‘dignity’ cannot possibly refer to sinful practices. ‘Good’ teaching addresses sin for what it is and the outcome is beneficial even if painful. Good teaching cannot affirm that which is fundamentally not good. If anything, this passage says exactly the opposite to the interpretation given by Vines. The fruit of teaching that homosexual practice is acceptable is fundamentally immoral. It cannot be good. And if it is immoral, to pursue it is not to enhance our dignity but to demean it.

### **Genesis 2:18**

*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."*

Vines is correct in saying that ‘it is not good for a man to be alone’. After all, this is a straight quotation from Scripture. To properly understand this verse it is necessary to distinguish between being ‘alone’ and being ‘lonely’. The point of this passage is that for the human race to continue, ‘aleness’ will not do. This is ‘not good’. Children can only be conceived by the coming together of a man and a woman. Of course, marriage also addresses the problem of loneliness, but not exclusively. Loneliness can be overcome through many kinds of companionship.

Further, to leap from this point to argue that this text implies homosexual liaison is to go well beyond the Scripture. The solution to the question of alone-ness is marriage to a person of the opposite sex. This is clearly stated in verse 18 and also in verse 24. This is in principle ‘how things were meant to be’. The fact that in a fallen world some people cannot marry or raise a family because of sickness or accident or cultural mores does not change the principle.

Sexual organs are designed for both reproduction and male-female union (Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:18, 24). That some people cannot use them for this purpose does not change the original intention or allow alternative usage; nor does the fact that some people choose not to use them for this purpose. Such variations or deviations from the original intention cannot be described as ‘equal’ with it. In the same way, legs are designed for standing or motion; the fact that a minority of people cannot stand or walk, often for reasons beyond their control, does not alter the original intention. That’s what legs are for. That some people cannot use them in this way (through injury or age, for example) does not alter that purpose. Nor does it suggest that other usages of legs (e.g. kicking someone) are ‘equal’ with the primary purpose.

Obviously it is agreed that there are many people who are not just alone; they *feel* lonely. Examples are obvious: widows, divorcees, singles, invalids. The impression is commonly given by advocates of homosexual liaison that people with same-sex attraction are the only ones who suffer like this. We need to do all we can for these many other people in our community who would also love to have an intimate relationship with another human being but cannot. But while everything must be done to address their needs with compassion and practical care, committing adultery or fornication is not a godly option.

The most common argument raised in favour of same-sex marriage is, ‘If two people love each other, why shouldn’t they be able to marry?’ At first glance this sounds fair and reasonable. But it only takes a moment of reflection to realise that the same reasoning would permit incest. Why not marry your sister or your daughter or your mother? Or why not marry several people? The logic is the same. Love in itself is not enough. There are other spiritual, biblical and moral factors to consider.

### **Genesis 19:1-11**

*And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them"*

As Vines correctly points out, there are many issues illustrated in this story, gang rape being one of them. Also there are ancient codes of hospitality involved (codes which seem abhorrent to us today). But even so, there is also homosexual practice. No matter how we cut the pack, homosexual behaviour is part of this incident and it is not endorsed. While not naming the offence specifically, Ezekiel 16:50 refers to ‘an abomination’ committed in Sodom and Jude describes their sin as ‘sexual immorality’ and ‘unnatural desire’ (Jude 7). Vines claims that it is widely conceded by scholars’ that the sin was violence rather than homosexuality’ but offers no specific evidence. On the other hand, the majority of biblical scholars and virtually all English translations identify the sinful practice of the men of Sodom as including homosexual behaviour.

### **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.**

*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*

These passages clearly describe homosexual behaviour as sinful. The expression is strong and it is illogical, and indeed impossible, seriously to reinterpret the meaning. Vines argues that other practices involving matters such as dress and diet that we would not define as sinful are described in Leviticus in similar terms and it would be impossible to mount a convincing case for applying them today.

At this point, he fails to address the distinction between moral and social law that is fundamental to an understanding of Old Testament legislation. Differentiating between Hebraic moral and cultural offences is not as difficult as is sometimes claimed. First, the degree of punishment in each case indicates a difference between them. Moral offences are generally dealt with much more severely. There is no stated penalty for mixing clothing materials, whereas death is the sentence for rape (Deuteronomy 22:11, 25). Second, in Leviticus 22, actions like adultery, homosexual practice and bestiality are all grouped together. They are clearly all seriously sinful and are plainly different from cultural injunctions. Third, where the New Testament reinforces an Old Testament command, it remains relevant. So the command not to bear false witness, for example, is still applicable today (Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9). So too with homosexual practice. The New Testament also calls it sin.

Vines cites the Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, as resolving that the Mosaic Law is not binding on Gentile believers. However, he ignores the explicit instruction to abstain from sexual immorality—a term that includes homosexual behaviour and other sexual sins described in Leviticus 18.

Vines indicates a link between homosexual practice and idolatry. This idea is developed further by Justin Lee who claims that the Hebrew term for ‘abomination’ in regard to homosexual actions (Leviticus 20:13) was most often used in the Old Testament in relation to idolatry.<sup>8</sup> Even if this was true, it does not prevent its use in other contexts. For example, in English the term ‘worship’ is mostly used about worshiping God or gods, but this does not mean it cannot be applied to worshiping another person or even a practice or activity. The meaning of a word is ultimately determined by its context.

As it happens, Lee’s claim is not supported by the evidence anyway. The relevant Hebrew term for ‘abomination’ is not only used in the context of idolatry. It also occurs frequently in Proverbs, for example, to describe a range of sins including lying, theft, murder, enmity, deceitfulness and dishonesty (e.g. Proverbs 3:32; 6:16; 11:1; 11:20; 12:22) and by Jeremiah (6:15) in reference to greed and falsehood and so on. So this argument cannot be used to

---

<sup>8</sup> Justin Lee. *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*. New York: Jericho Books, 2012:176.

establish that the homosexual practice referred to in the Old Testament is necessarily linked to idolatry, although like other sins, it obviously could be. The clear understanding of the Mosaic law is that it refers to men engaging in sexual acts together, whatever the context. This is confirmed by other ancient writings of the period describing homosexual behaviour as being similar to that which same-sex activists describe as common practice today.<sup>9</sup>

### **Romans 1:26-27.**

*For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

This is the strongest New Testament passage against homosexual practice. Vines claims that Paul uses the word ‘natural’ with the meaning of ‘according to custom’. So in a different age and in a different place, it could well differ in meaning. He draws a parallel with 1 Corinthians 11:14 which claims that nature teaches us that men have short hair. Clearly, says Vines, in this case ‘nature’ obviously refers to accepted custom not to something inherent in humanity. This argument seems plausible until we look at other uses of ‘natural’ in the New Testament where it clearly refers to what is an essential and integral part of who we are. Clear examples are to be found in Romans 2:14, Galatians 4:8, Ephesians 2:3 and 2 Peter 1:4. In none of these texts can the term ‘nature’ mean other than its primary meaning of the essential qualities or the native, inherent fundamental character of being.

It is of interest, by the way, that in his *Laws* (Book 8), Plato has one of his characters make a clear distinction between those actions that follow nature (e.g. marriage) and those customs that are contrary to nature (sexual immorality). Nature, he says, is clearly at variance with custom. He also compares ‘natural love’, between a man and a woman, with ‘unnatural love’ and describes sexual liaison which cannot result in procreation as ‘unnatural’.

The phrase ‘God gave them up’ is used three times in Romans chapter one and each time in regard to different outcomes, not just homosexual practice. The fundamental issue is of people giving themselves over to worshiping the creature rather than the Creator (21-25) and therefore ‘God gave them up’ to the natural consequences of such an approach, including sodomy. This passage cannot be narrowed down to just the consequences of worshiping idols: what Paul is talking about is putting the things of this world before the kingdom of God. Of course, this may be called idolatry, and may include homosexual practice, which like any sexual sin, is itself putting the creature (the human body, or even worse, the parts of the human body) before the Creator.

Vines goes on to argue that rejection of truth manifests itself as an excess of lust. So it is not homosexual behaviour that is sinful; it is going to excess. If a person is already homosexual, then they should stay that way. It would be ‘unnatural’ for them to engage with someone of the opposite sex and it is this inversion of roles in either direction that Paul denounces. This is such a blatant misreading and twisting of the Word of God that it is hard to know how to address it. It is like arguing with someone who maintains that the moon is made of cheese. Isaiah 5:20 seems relevant: ‘Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.’

---

<sup>9</sup> See Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

One can only come back to the plain and obvious meaning of the original text: it is sinful to exchange natural desires (physical intimacy with someone of the opposite sex) for unnatural desires (physical engagement with people of the same sex).

Vines also tries to argue that it is not life-long faithful partnerships that Paul denounces in this passage but other forms of same-sex behaviour, which he sees as an expression of gluttony, and therefore can be justly deplored. Given that the latter is actually true of most male homosexual behaviour today, even if Vines is right, this text would still be applicable to much of what is happening now. By conceding that the same-sex behaviour here is rightly denounced, it must also be conceded that the homosexual acts practised today also ought to be denounced.

But historically, this cannot be established and if it cannot be established and the same-sex behaviour here described is similar to all homosexual practice, his argument is left high and dry.

There seem to be three groupings of homosexual people. First, there are those who feel same-sex attraction but would love to be free of it and generally live celibate lives or struggle to be faithful to their marriage partners in spite of the conflict of passion they experience. Second, there are those who engage in same-sex activities but prefer to keep their behaviour discreet and private. Third, there are those who are proudly homosexual and want to be recognized publicly as having equal rights with everyone else. This is a growing and vocal group. In reality, the majority of contemporary homosexual men in this group are not in long-term relationships and generally don't want to be. Evidently for them it is not companionship they seek, but sexual pleasure. This is where much of the propaganda with which we are confronted today is so difficult to deal with because it is essentially dishonest. The plea for same-sex marriage, for example, is too often a plea for acceptance and respectability, not for marriage itself.

### **Matthew 19:1-12.**

*Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*

This is a passage that Vines does not quote but it cannot be so easily bypassed; in fact, it is crucial to the whole debate. It represents Jesus' most definitive statement about marriage, a statement in which he speaks only in heterosexual terms. If he thought that homosexual practice was acceptable, here was the perfect opportunity to say so. Why does he refer only to a man and his wife? Why not to two men or two women? In reality, the only sexual relationship Jesus approved or commended is heterosexual and covenantal, a concept, he specifically says, that was laid down at the very beginning, at Creation. He tells us here how things were supposed to be. The question is not what Jesus condemned but what he commended. And that was plainly marriage between a man and a woman.

It is sometimes claimed that Jesus' failure to refer specifically to homosexual practice anywhere in his teaching indicates an implicit acceptance of it. In fact, the opposite is true. When talking about sexual sin, Jesus used the word *porneia* (Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21). In first century culture, this term was generally used for any kind of sexual immorality and in particular for prostitution (a *porne* was a female prostitute, a  *pornos* was a male prostitute and

a *porneion* was a brothel).<sup>10</sup> In the New Testament, it means any kind of illicit sexual intercourse and specifically includes adultery (Matthew 5:32), incest (1 Corinthians 5:1) and fornication (John 8:41), all of which were grouped together, along with sodomy in Leviticus chapter 22, as we have seen. The term is used in a spiritual sense for idolatry (Revelation 2:21; 14:8) which plainly includes the idea of infidelity. Other sexual sins such as rape, pederasty and bestiality are not particularly identified, but there is no doubt that they also slot into the same category. Certainly, from their knowledge of Mosaic Law Jewish listeners would have readily understood *porneia* to include homosexual practice as well. It did not need to be spelled out. They were well aware of the clear parallels drawn between all aspects of sexual immorality in the Old Testament where the following acts are all depicted as being offensive to God—pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexual activity, incest, bestiality and rape (Exodus 22:6; Leviticus 18:20, 22; 20:12, 13, 15, 20; Deuteronomy 22:25).

It is no argument to claim that Jesus accepted homosexual practice but was reluctant to say so for fear of offence to Jewish religious culture. He showed no such reluctance on other issues. One would hardly consider his denunciation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-29) to be conciliatory! Further, and perhaps more relevant, was his readiness to redefine other Old Testament injunctions, such as ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ (Matthew 5:38-41). This law was clearly laid down to guarantee natural justice (Exodus 21:23-36), yet Jesus lifts the ethical bar to a still higher level by pointing out that forgiveness and generosity may offer a better solution.

In fact, rather than tempering traditional commands, he generally intensified them. To him, it was not the action that was the real issue, but the desire that lay behind it. So it was the heart-attitude behind adultery or violence that was the real problem, not the act itself (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28). Likewise, if he had wanted to modify the Mosaic approach to homosexual practice, it is more likely that he would have taken a similar approach, teaching that while the act is sinful, the desire to do it is the root of the problem. It would have been astonishing if he had approved it. The idea that he would diminish or weaken the Old Testament stance is plainly inconsistent with his approach to other teachings and actions.

### **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 practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

The phrase ‘men who practise homosexuality’ in this passage from the English Standard Version is actually a translation of two separate terms used by Paul. The first is the plural form of *malakos*. Vines argues that this term has a wider meaning than just homosexuality. This is true. Its primary meaning is ‘soft’ or ‘effeminate’. But this does not mean it excludes it. One scholar goes on to define it as a technical term for the passive partner in homosexual relations.<sup>11</sup> It is rendered variously by translators as ‘catamites’ (i.e. pederasts, *Jerusalem Bible*), ‘effeminate’ (KJV, ASV) and ‘male prostitutes’ (NIV, NRSV). Barnes suggests it

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Moulton and G. Millikan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985:529; J. H. Thayer (tr. And ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977:532.

<sup>11</sup> F. Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Regency, 1980:402.

refers to ‘those who are given up to wantonness and sensual pleasures, or who are kept to be prostituted to others’.

The second term *arsenokoites* is derived from the words for ‘man’ (*arsen*) and ‘bed’ (*koite*). Vines correctly points out that etymology does not always explain the current meaning of a term, but in this case it does. The reference is to same-sex engagement, to men who share their bed.

Vines goes on to argue that neither of these terms applies to homosexual practice as it is understood today and that it was only in 1946 that the first English translation of the Bible suggested that they do. Here again, he is arguing against historical evidence, the context and the widespread understanding of biblical scholars. Nearly 500 years ago, in his pioneer 1526 translation, William Tyndale translated *arsenokoites* as ‘abusers of themselves with mankind’. This seems vague in the context of our current generation where we tend to be more explicit on these issues, but it does reflect the language of his day in which it was the accepted description of homosexual practice. The word ‘abuse’ was used in 1538 to refer to ‘improper use or perversion’.<sup>12</sup> Liddell and Scott’s 1872 lexicon defines *arsenokoites* as applying to one who practises ‘unnatural offences’, a nineteenth century term for same-sex interaction. Barnes’s 19<sup>th</sup> Century *Notes on the New Testament* define the term as referring to ‘pæderastæ or sodomites’. The 1881 *Revised Version* of the Bible employs the phrase ‘abusers of themselves with men’.

Some contemporary translations utilize terms like ‘homosexual offenders’ (NIV), ‘men who practise homosexuality’ (ESV), ‘makes a wrong use of men’ (Basic English) or ‘sodomites’ (NRSV). Others simply combine both the nouns used by Paul with phrases such as ‘homosexuals’ (God’s Word, ISV) or ‘men who have sex with men’ (NIV, 2010). The evidence is compelling that the Bible’s reference here is to homosexual sin. The same comment can be applied to 1 Timothy 1:10, where *arsenokoites* is employed in an identical way. Virtually every Bible translation of this text agrees, including the NIrV that renders it ‘those who have a twisted view of sex’.

It is the following verse (11) that clinches the matter.

*And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11, ESV).*

If the ten representative groups listed in the previous two verses are not acting wrongly, then this verse is meaningless, for it declares unequivocally that the Corinthians, who used to practise such things, were washed, sanctified and justified from them. How can we be washed, sanctified and justified of behaviour that is not sinful? To argue otherwise is to make a mockery of the Word of God.

There is one more point to make on this passage—probably the most important of all. Paul’s focus is actually not on the seriousness of the sin but on the greatness of the grace that delivers us from that sin. This is the crux of the matter. In the name of Christ and by the power of the Spirit it is possible to be set free. So our task is not to denounce sin and condemn the sinner but to declare the liberation that is possible through Christ. This is the message Jesus came to bring (Luke 4:18-19) and it is the message God’s people need to deliver. We can be set free and cleansed from any sin, including sodomy. It is a matter for regret that Christians have too often missed this and have come across as judgemental and self-righteous.

---

<sup>12</sup> W. Little, H. J. Fowler, J. Coulson (eds) and C. T. Onions (rev. ed.), *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967:9.



## 1 Corinthians 7:9

*But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

Vines argues that if Paul suggested that marriage was an effective solution for dealing with sexual desire, why shouldn't the same argument apply to homosexuals? Again, this sounds plausible. But if so, why doesn't Paul say so? In none of his references to marriage is there even a hint of homosexual relationships. Everyone has desires of one kind or another, and it is right and proper for these desires to be fulfilled—but only in a lawful manner. If we are hungry, it is right to eat; but it is not right to steal in order to eat. If we need clothes it is right to obtain them, but not to rob from someone else. And if we are lonely and unfulfilled, it is right to find fulfilment through marriage but not through rape, adultery or homosexual engagement.

It might be argued in return that if there is a choice between starving and stealing, the latter might be acceptable. This is a fair point, given that starving will ultimately be fatal. But this is not relevant to sexual frustration which will not result in death, no matter how much it feels like it will.

## Ephesians 5:21-32

*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (25-27)*

This is another passage not quoted by Vines, but relevant to the discussion, not for what it does teach about homosexual practice, but for what it doesn't. Without going into detail, it is enough to observe that there is not even a hint of homosexual relationships here. Beyond question, the marriage of which the apostle speaks is between a man and a woman. The wife has a specific role and the husband has a specific role—roles which cannot reasonably or ontologically be applied to two people of the same sex. The language used is clearly heterosexual. Masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns are employed consistently.<sup>13</sup> The description of the Bride is clearly in feminine terms. It would be an extreme and unwarranted form of eisegesis to read any alternative sexual identities into this passage. Moreover, marriage is portrayed as a reflection of the relationship between Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, and the Church, his chosen Bride. Same-sex marriage does not convey such an image. Similar comments could be made about other New Testament passages on marriage.

In summary, one cannot but feel sympathy for Matthew Vines and the community for which he speaks. His talk is clearly a cry for understanding and approval, a cry that cannot be ignored. But the biblical issues cannot be ignored either: they cannot be swept under the carpet or even worse, twisted into new meanings.

Even so, to ignore the pain and sense of rejection felt by homosexuals is unacceptable. Somehow the old adage of 'hate the sin but love the sinner' has to be demonstrated convincingly in our time. Both are necessary. The gospel always begins with accepting love and concludes with transforming hope. 'Neither do I condemn you' and 'Go and sin no more' stand irreversibly together.

Jesus' commission in Luke 4:18 provides a good model. The compassionate underlay of this passage is obvious: there is good news for the poor. But this good news is more than

---

<sup>13</sup> It is recognised that these nouns are also grammatically gender-specific, and that this does not necessarily imply sexual distinction, but had the apostle wished to make it clear he was including same-sex relationships, there were alternative forms of expression he could have chosen.

acceptance. It also includes emancipation. If it were only acceptance, it would be an insipid claim. Jesus came to set people free. Through him there is liberation. And liberation means change. It means release from slavery and servitude, including to sexual thralldom. In spite of widely quoted claims to the contrary, people with homosexual inclinations can change. Their position is not fixed. There is always hope in every situation of release through Christ.

**Note:** This draft paper does not purport to be a discussion of homosexuality in general and, except for a couple of paragraphs, is restricted to discussing the issues raised by Matthew Vines. Comments or suggestions are welcome.

*Version: 22 June 2015*