

Since the Bible seems only to condemn same-sex relations, how can some Christians argue that the church should affirm same-sex marriage or the ordination of openly gay and lesbian Christians? Where is there any support for this approach in the Bible?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

This is a crucial question that calls for a constructive response. A *constructive* response is one that helps to build and to edify the church as the body of Christ (see, e.g., 1 Cor 12-14). A *constructive* response also means that as faithful Christians we are seeking precisely to *construct* an answer that addresses competing claims that we feel must be included in any response. What does it mean for us to discern God's Spirit as we seek to construct a faithful response to the question of the status of lesbian and gay Christians in our midst?

We are not the first ones to ask comparable questions about a constructive response that seeks to discern God's Spirit in addressing controversial and divisive issues. The history of the church is full of such struggles, whether we look to the Apostle Paul, the split between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic tradition, the fights between the Protestants and Catholics, or the debates in the United States over slavery and the status of women in the church. In all of these debates both sides appealed to the witness of Scripture, church tradition, reason, and experience in light of God's Spirit to argue positions that were exactly the opposite of one another. As we address the current crisis regarding the recognition of openly gay and lesbian clergy and same-sex relationships, we must do so in light of the church's long history of heated debates over discerning the leading of God's Spirit. It is our challenge, our responsibility, and our opportunity to be engaged in such discernment where, to be sure, we

do our best to see through a glass darkly as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling.

To the question at hand, then. Since the Bible seems to condemn same-sex relations, how can some Christians on the basis of Scripture argue that the church should endorse same-sex relations of any kind, whether by celebrating gay marriage or by ordaining openly gay clergy?

There are basically two responses to this question, both grounded in Scripture. First, we must be clear about what Scripture condemns and why. We must be aware that the notion of “homosexual orientation” is a modern notion (as is sexual orientation in general), and that the term “homosexual” is never found in Scripture – even though some translations anachronistically and misleadingly render the

original Hebrew and Greek words from Scripture as

“homosexual.” Such translations read our modern

understandings back into Scripture and fail to understand

Scripture on its own terms. For example, in Paul’s letters, the passing references that condemn same-sex relations (Rom 1; 1

Cor 6) are addressed to the context of Paul’s day, where same-sex

relations were typically and understandably seen as exploitive, especially given that pederasty and slave-prostitution were the primary forms of same-sex relations with which Paul would have been familiar.

To condemn all modern-day homosexual relationships on the basis of the exploitive same-sex relations of Paul’s day would be the same as condemning all modern-day heterosexual relationships on the basis of David’s adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. Just as there is no blanket condemnation of all heterosexual relations because of some inappropriate heterosexual actions (rape, incest, adultery), so also we may ask if it is correct to issue a blanket condemnation of all same-sex relations because those referred to in Scripture were exploitive and thus inappropriate relations (e.g., rape & pederasty).

Further, in Paul’s time such homoerotic expressions were viewed as being against nature (cf. Rom 1). But what counts as natural or unnatural varies from age to age and culture to culture. (Consider Paul’s comments on hair length in 1 Cor 11.) In our present age we have come to understand that individuals are born with a sexual orientation of which they become aware as they mature. Sexual orientation is as natural and unchosen as left-handedness or brown eyes. It is simply part of the rich diversity of God’s creation.

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Thus, first and foremost it is important to understand Scripture on its own terms, with its own cultural assumptions and perspectives – some of which views we regard as inapplicable in our time. Perhaps the best example of this is the Presbyterian Church’s stance on the role of women in church leadership. Scripture is quite explicit in its rejection of women for such leadership positions (1 Cor 14; 1 Tim 2), and yet the modern church argues (correctly) that the Spirit of God has led us to recognize that women have been gifted by God just as men, and therefore are appropriate candidates for positions of ordination and church leadership. This current position stands in significant tension with many biblical evaluations of women as being subordinate to men and of less value than men. And yet we are confident as a church that we are being faithful to the call of God’s Spirit, even though the inclusion of women in leadership roles caused tremendous conflict in the church.

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This observation leads to the second biblical response to the question posed above. It is one thing to say that the Bible’s passing references to practices significantly different from modern practices do not amount to an outright ban. But does Scripture provide any reasons to affirm same-sex relations or ordination of openly gay/lesbian Christians? I think it is important to state clearly that Scripture offers no direct evidence for such a case. But this is not the end of the story, as Scripture does not offer direct evidence for any number of concerns crucial to Christian faith and practice (e.g., various issues of modern bioethics).

Scripture did not provide Paul with all he needed to know, nor did he always have a “word from the Lord” regarding important new situations. But Paul did think he was able to discern the Spirit. For example, Paul appeals to the Galatians to reflect on their own communal experience of God’s Spirit (Gal 3:1-5) as the most important guide regarding whether or not they should observe the Jewish ritual law. Paul broke with established custom and even, arguably, with the teachings of Jesus in this regard (cf. Matthew 5:18-19). But Paul felt himself led by the Spirit and believed that the experiences of Gentile Christians confirmed their reception of the Spirit apart from the law.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles made the same kind of argument in his narrative of God’s inclusion of the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius did not have to become a law-observant Jew in order to have proper faith in Christ. This went completely against early Christian tradition, as the controversy of Acts 10-11, 15, and Galatians 2 richly attests. God startled Peter with the rooftop vision and the firm

declaration, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10: 15). God was doing what appeared to be a new thing. Paul and Peter were calling on the church to acknowledge what God was doing, even though it scandalized the church and seemed to go against scripture and tradition.

In short, then, while Scripture does not provide direct testimony of God's blessing of same-sex relationships or of gay clergy, Scripture does provide clear and direct testimony of God's call to pay attention to the inclusion of the faithful whom the church has often failed to see as welcomed by God. Peter paid attention to Cornelius' faithful response to God's Spirit, even though he was a Gentile. Paul paid attention to the Galatians' faithful response to the Spirit, and made a point that their experience was to guide them in matters of faith and practice even against the testimony of time-honored interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

Scripture calls upon us in the church today to pay attention to the testimony of God's Spirit as we have experienced the profound faith of gay and lesbian Christians in our midst. As Peter told the Jerusalem assembly, "If God gave [Cornelius's household] the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11: 17). Surely we must see them first of all as brothers and sisters in Christ who are baptized in the same Spirit that all Christians share, brothers and sisters who do not cease to be gay or lesbian by virtue of their Christian faith.

So does the Bible provide positive evidence for the inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in the church? Does the Bible give Christians reason to affirm same-sex relationships and the ordination of gay/lesbian Christians? In my view the answer is a resounding YES. We need to listen to the voices of our sisters and brothers in Christ whose sexual orientation in no way hampers their ability to form loving and committed relationships, just as it in no way hampers their capacity to serve God and the church in ordained ministry. To this Scripture, tradition, reason, and especially Christian experience bears witness as we seek to discern and to embody God's loving and healing Spirit in a broken world. Let us welcome all to the community of faith and the community of ministry in this Spirit.