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Good news? ‘LGBT couples “will be able to celebrate their love... in a Christian [marriage] ceremony”’

Good morning. I had hoped to be with you live today, but some recent surgery means I am not yet up to being out and about for very long. Sorry!

I have ten minute to comment on how we should relate to the suggestion that ‘LGBT couples “will be able to celebrate their love... in a Christian [marriage] ceremony”’. So let me begin to do so.

It is certainly true that there is huge pressure to get churches to conduct weddings for LGBT couples; and that some churches are already doing so. Whether we will think there is good news here depends upon where we take our bearings from to form a Christian understanding of sex. Those who think we have good news here want to celebrate bringing the church up to date and ensuring it is fit for the twenty-first century.

But can it be faithfully Christian if we haven’t first tested these new options out on the New Testament foundations of our faith, and in particular the Gospel teaching of Jesus? Surely not.

I want to use two questions to focus up our attempt to ascertain whether we have good news here.

My questions are: 1. How important were sexual matters to Jesus and the early church?

And 2. Did Jesus have anything to say about homosexual sexual activity?

Before I can address these questions directly I need to introduce you to the main bad-sex words in the Bible.

One is the word we translate as adultery. This is the more straightforward one. In Greek it is the moich root. In the ancient world adultery was almost always about the violation of a man’s marriage. Women could commit adultery, but could not have adultery committed against them. Women were bound by a promise of fidelity to their husbands; men were not.

Singlehandedly Jesus changed all that. He created a level playing field. If it was adultery for a married woman to have sex with another man, then it was also adultery for a married man to have sex with another woman. Faithfulness and exclusivity are called for in both directions.

The moich root is about bad-sex that is bad specifically in terms of breaking faith with one's spouse.

The other bad-sex word makes use of the Greek porn root. This one has had an impact on English, obviously in the word pornography. We have traditionally translated this root with the language of fornication. The trouble is that fornication has become a very old-fashioned word, rapidly disappearing from contemporary English. Some modern translations have sexual immorality. But what kind of sex is considered to be immoral. The translation assumes you already know, but moderns don't.

What isn't immediately obvious to us is that Jesus' hearers had a clear frame of reference for understanding what kinds of sex the porn root referred to. They would spontaneously understand the word in connection with the relevant Old Testament teaching and Jewish life of their own period. With no ambiguity porn was any kind of sexual connection with another person that was not within the context of a marriage commitment.

Wrongly located sex is called porn in the New Testament whether undertaken by marrieds or singles. Only when one wanted to point to the infidelity aspect would moich be preferred. Moich is always porn; porn is not always moich.

Now to our questions. First, how important were sexual matters to Jesus and the early church?

We take some soundings in the Gospels. We are in no doubt that Jesus had a profound focus on love and was deeply concerned for the poor. What you probably haven't noticed is that Jesus mentions the problems of bad sex in one way or another about twice as often as he talked about love or the poor.

In Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has a set of six antitheses. These are designed to take us to the heart of Jesus' ethical vision. Two of the six are about sexual ethics.

Strikingly, Jesus extended the reach of sexual morality into the thought life of people. For him, even sexual imaginings count.

What about Paul? Sexual sins turn up regularly in Paul's vice lists. In three different letters he says 'those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:5). He actually has quite a lot more references to sexual immorality than the Gospels. And he uses quite a lot

of extra Greek words. In the wider Graeco-Roman world where sexual morality was more lax Paul had quite a lot more to grapple with.

It looks like sexual matters were very important to Jesus and the early church. From the earliest period their sexual views and behaviour marked early Christians out from their wider culture.

So, to the second question: did Jesus have anything to say about homosexual sex?

It is easy to say that he didn't. Jesus didn't ever pick out homosexual sex for individual comment. He didn't need to. In the Gospels there are two words that between them cover all bad sex. Porn will mean all the kinds of bad sex that are picked out for comment in the Old Testament. There is quite a list of kinds, but prominent among them is homosexual sex. If Jesus was talking directly into our context he would have realised the need to pick homosexual sex out for special mention. But he was a first-century Jew talking primarily to Jews. There was no doubt there what the reach of porn was. What Jesus thought of homosexual sex is hiding in plain sight in the Gospels.

With our questions now answered we turn back to where we started from. Is the prospect of gay marriages good news? For those of us who take our bearings from Jesus and the faith of the early church the answer is clear. This is all bad news. The ethics of fornication - porn - can't be changed by calling a commitment to a regularised homosexual form of porn a marriage.