

SECONDARY ISSUES & SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS: Why It Matters What *Really* Matters

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015, First Baptist Church Prince George (FBC) experienced a watershed moment that greatly affected the future trajectory of their church family. The impetus for this moment occurred on a Sunday morning when the lead pastor (who had been serving for five years) preached a powerful, emotional, and vulnerable sermon *in support of* monogamous same-sex relationships. Being that FBC is a conservatively progressive¹ congregation, the result of the pastor's declaration was a few anxious weeks of reactive emails, anxious conversations, erroneous assumptions, closed-door meetings, and damage control. At the end of the few weeks, the lead pastor voluntarily and humbly resigned. The actual watershed moment, however, directly followed the pastor's resignation when the church board unanimously produced a statement which 1) endorsed the lead pastor's calling to full-time ministry; 2) declared positions on same-sex relationships will not be considered core beliefs of the Christian faith; and 3) upheld an official doctrinal stance in line with its Baptist affiliate which *does not affirm same-sex relationships*.

The significance of this statement cannot be overstated. FBC leadership chose to acknowledge same-sex relationships² as a secondary theological issue, essentially freeing leaders at all levels (even pastorship), to hold diverging views. No small feat for a Baptist church. Unfortunately, some congregants left the church because the matter was of primary theological concern to them. At the same time, others who did not appreciate that FBC maintained their official "non-affirming" position, also left the family. The majority of those who stayed agreed to adopt the statement produced by the leadership (whether intellectually or by default), and for the most part, FBC became more unified and better equipped to discuss complex and polarizing subjects ever since.

To some degree, the matter was dealt with. To another and growing degree, the matter had only begun because same-sex relationships were becoming more and more prevalent in the world-wide Church. Therefore, it was vital that FBC further their understanding and theological basis for relegating same-sex relationships to a "non-essential" category, and be

¹ This is my own term, it basically refers to a congregation that values traditional religious views but is also cautiously open to reform and listening to but not necessarily implementing new liberal ideas.

² For the entirety of this paper, same-sex relationships refer to those relationships between gay/lesbians who are seeking the same path to intimacy that heterosexuals experience. This includes respect for sexual intimacy within the confines of a monogamous lifelong commitment (or marriage).

clear on what this may mean for their church and mission. In other words, it was not enough that FBC had *labelled* it secondary, they needed a well-developed theological foundation for such a claim. This paper will try and provide such a theological foundation.

Now for the sake of clarity I must provide some notes. This paper is purposefully not seeking to establish a scriptural or theological position for, or against, monogamous LGBTQ relationships. Rather, I am considering the specific subject of same-sex relationships to help us define and determine what makes a theological issue “secondary”. In other words and more specific, this paper is an attempt to answer the question, **“Why are same-sex relationships a secondary theological issue and what does that mean for the Church’s role in God’s redemptive plan?”** I realize that for those who think the Bible conclusively condemns same-sex relationships, this question, in and of itself, is a red flag. Therefore, for those who may have their *scriptural-authority* warning bells going off, please allow me to try and reframe the question in a more appropriate phrasing: “Is it possible that God gives freedom and grace for Christians to differ on their biblical interpretation of same-sex relationships, so that they may worship together, consider one another fellow followers of Christ, and share in the same mission?” For the reader who adamantly answers “no” to this question, they may wish to save themselves the trouble and the time of reading on. For the reader who answers yes, or maybe—or those that struggle even answering the question—then this essay may be helpful.

Some notes regarding language may be helpful before we move forward. First, I have the goal to keep this theological reflection as accessible and understandable as possible so that it may be used as a resource for churches. This means I do my best to avoid scholarly and uncommon language or mentioning numerous theologians (although I will still provide supporting sources through footnotes and a bibliography). Secondly, I do my best to respectfully write about the LGBTQ community. At the time this paper was written, “LGBTQ” was an appropriate term to describe the community that experience same-sex attraction. At the risk of dating this paper, I have chosen to stick with this terminology.

I offer a note here to try and ease the anxious reader. I would encourage you to do your best to avoid the trap of thinking I have a hidden agenda—as if this really *is* a position paper on same-sex relationships—it really *is* not. In fact, it is because I recognize there are well-supported but divergent views on this matter, which are causing rifts within the Christian Church, that this paper is being written.

Finally—and at the risk of actually closing minds—I would ask that the reader’s mind remain open to a thoughtful theological journey. This journey may challenge many assumed

and *inherited* beliefs,³ not only about same-sex relationships but also on a *range* of topics. So, allow me to offer a prayer for the reader as well as for myself:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Ephesians 1:17

PART 1 – BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

What is a secondary issue?

As we dig into the scriptures regarding our big question, we should clarify what we mean by a *secondary issue* or *disputable matter*, and also, properly frame our discussion to avoid rabbit trailing or getting sucked into the same-sex relationship debate. In essence, a *secondary issue* is any theological or ethical principle that is not a core tenet or *primary* belief of the Christian faith. For example, God is Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and in Christian circles that is a non-negotiable primary belief. A related *secondary issue* could be the length of time in which God took to make it. No matter how long you believe it took God to create the universe, the primary matter of faith—the creative, omnipotent, authority of Creator God—remains untouched. However, the apostle Paul, as we will discuss later, calls some issues of faith *dialogismōn* (a matter of one’s own reasoning)⁴ ⁵. Since Christians are in dispute over the length of the creation account, this issue is not only *secondary* in nature, but also *disputable* and left to a matter of one’s own reasoning.

Even though what we believe about the age of the earth should have no bearing on our belief about Creator God, some see any interpretation other than a literal six day creation as forsaking the Scriptures. For Christians, the authority of God’s word in the Bible to direct our behaviours and beliefs is a primary theological stance. Quickly we see that believing in a 4.5-billion-year-old Earth could be seen by some as challenging this primary issue. This example gives us the proper framing for our discussion, for we see the same thing cropping up in the same-sex relationships debate. For the most part, people who affirm and condone same-sex relationships believe that their theological position does not affect or challenge the core beliefs of the Christian faith, *including* authority of Scripture. On the other hand, others believe that any deviation from their traditional non-affirming position completely undermines the truth of

³ For further reading on thoughtful (deliberative) versus inherited (embedded) theology, see, Howard Stone and James Duke, *How to think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), Ch. 1

⁴ This is my own paraphrasing based on a Greek word study. Popular Bible translations all differ on their rendering which includes, “disputable matters” (NIV), “opinions” (ESV), “what they think is right or wrong” (NLT).

⁵ For further reading see, Lee, Jae-won. *Paul and the Politics of Difference*. Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014

scripture. But does it really? Or does it only undermine the truth of a certain *interpretation* of scripture? We could see how this issue could go back and forth purely over interpretational differences and theological biases. Therefore, a better way to properly judge the secondary nature of the same-sex attraction issue is needed. In other words, you and I may disagree on whether the Bible condones or condemns same-sex relationships, but allow me to show you below, why we can still go to the same church, worship together, and consider each other fellow siblings in Christ's family and kingdom.

Theological influences affecting secondary issues

Above I mentioned the need to remain open-minded on a number of issues. The reason that this is vital to our conversation, is that many of us, myself included, bring theological biases, assumptions and inherited beliefs that effect our ability to clearly approach other theological principles. This embedded theology⁶ is deeply rooted in our upbringing and socio-cultural setting in and out of the church. As we search the scriptures to help us answer our big question, we must be mindful of the following related matters that may influence us on our way towards our conclusion.

- 1) *What is sin?* In other words, is sin simply the things the Bible tells us not to do based on a list provided to us by Jesus and the apostles, or is it something less clear?
- 2) *What is human flourishing?* Or, if sin leads to death, what leads to fullness of life unto life everlasting?
- 3) *What is the church's mission within new creation?* Is it primarily saving souls for heaven or acting as agents in Jesus's new kingdom?

Each of these issues is clearly a library of articles and books on their own. However, I will do my best to succinctly integrate their basic principles into our discussion in a helpful and progressive way.

Paul on disputable matters

It is clear from the beginning of the Church that disputable matters in the Christian faith have existed. Arguably the most well-known example is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church regarding sacrificed meat (Ch. 8). Here, Paul does not give the direct command to altogether avoid this practice, rather, he allows each believer to use *a matter of one's own reasoning*. Commonly, this scripture is referenced in contemporary teachings on Christian behaviour, such as drinking alcohol, risqué internet media, or fowl language.

⁶ Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*.

Rightfully, Christians today should concern themselves about how their behaviour could cause a fellow believer to stumble or struggle in their faith. But we realize there is more here, if we consider that at one time, avoiding sacrificed meat was the actual issue. In fact, we have a directive to Gentile believers in writing from the first apostolic council in Jerusalem⁷:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:
Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said... It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from *food sacrificed to idols*, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

Acts 15:23b-29 NIV⁸ (abridged, italics added)

Considering Paul was part of the team that delivered this letter to Gentile believers (v. 22), he was certainly well aware of the decision made by James (brother of Jesus) and the other most prominent leaders of the early church. But less than ten years after this council, we read the following in Paul's letter to the church he planted in Corinth,

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." ...But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak... Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

1 Corinthians 8 (abridged)

Is Paul now suggesting that the leaders of the Jerusalem council may be weak in their faith!? I do not think so. Clearly, Paul is differentiating between primary matters of faith such as love or justification through Christ's atoning sacrifice, and specific secondary matters of Christian life and practice. The point here, is that even though believers were instructed by the highest authority of the early church to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to false gods, Paul teaches that the practice itself does nothing to affect right relationship with God. Rather, he is pointing us to a bigger picture.

⁷ Most scholars would place this first council of the young church at around 48-50 AD.

⁸ All scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted, 2011 by Biblica Inc. (www.biblegateway.com).

Paul is somewhat more expansive when addressing the same issue in his letter to the believers in Rome. It is from this portion of scripture that we get to the heart of disputable matters (*dialogismōn* - matters of one's own reasoning), so we will tackle it in sections.

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall... One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God... For we will all stand before God's judgment seat... So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Romans 14:1-12 (abridged)

Considering the goal of Paul's letter to the Romans is for encouraging and building unity amongst the Gentile and Jewish believers (ch. 15)⁹, he is neither condemning Jewish practices, nor asking Gentiles to convert to strict Judaism. What is most important to notice, is that for sake of unity, Paul is teaching what Baptists have coined as *soul liberty*¹⁰; "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall." We have now arrived at our first guiding principal on disputable matters. When it comes to secondary matters of faith that Christians are unable to agree upon, Paul instructs us that *each believer has the freedom to hold their own personal conviction and is accountable for that conviction to God and only God*. This first point is crucial for we know that there are some disputed matters of Christian life and practice that we may never reconcile our *dialogismōn*—that is until "all things are reconciled" (Col. 1:20). But as a community of believers, we can choose to remain unified in the things that really matter. Consider the next section:

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister... If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love... For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification... It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

⁹ For a good introduction to the Book of Romans see: Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to read the bible book by book: a guided tour* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

¹⁰ Soul liberty is the general idea that each individual has the freedom to choose their own beliefs and interpretations of scripture and held accountable to God for such.

Romans 14:13-21 (abridged)

Love, righteousness, peace, building one another up; these are all the things that matter in the kingdom, not whether we should or should not obey a certain directive. Here we find our second principal when it comes to matters of *dialogismōn*: *If we must choose between rules or love, choose love*. Most readers will have themselves, or someone they know, experienced a situation with other Christians where rules were chosen over love. The results are overwhelmingly negative. I acknowledge for some though, that in a small way judging others and helping them follow rules *is* a sort-of love for their welfare (anyone with children will know exactly what this is like). But in light of our first principle of soul liberty, we would be wise to reflect if *their* welfare is really what we are concerned about. With this in mind, let us examine our last section:

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Romans 14:22-23

At this point, I think it would be good to remind the reader that Paul is referring here to issues, that at one time, were *specific directives* for practicing the Christian life. In a sense, the Gentiles had received something similar to what we have in the New Testament (although we have received it indirectly). Is Paul contradicting the directive from the Jerusalem council approximately ten years prior? Or perhaps we are seeing a corrective, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to help differentiate between a faith based on rules, and a faith based on actual faith. Let me explain. When Paul writes, “everything that does not come from faith is sin” what did he mean? He could *not* have meant that sin happens whenever we break a rule, because he just spent a whole chapter emphasizing the rules are not what matters. Here we must expand our understanding of the word *faith*. The Greek word used here is *πιστις* which is most commonly translated as, “belief” or “trust”. But these words do not seem to fit in this verse, for we learned earlier that even though we may believe or trust in a certain practice, it does not give us the right to act on it (1 Cor. 8:9). A less well-known translation, but one that appears to make much more sense in this context, is “loyalty” or “faithfulness”¹¹. Using this rendering, it becomes clearer now that Paul is saying that in everything we do, it must come from a place of loyalty to God—and might I add, faithfulness to mission. In other words (and our third principle), *our practices must reflect our loyalty to God and the mission He is calling us to*. The reason Paul speaks on *disputable* matters, is not to settle them or offer definitive directives for Christian living, but to remind believers about what *really* matters.

¹¹ For a fascinating and provocative read on a reinterpretation of the word “faith” and what it means in terms of salvation, read *Faith by Allegiance Alone*, by Matthew Bates (2017)

What is sin?

This is an ideal time to bring up our first theological influence from earlier. What is sin? Well, Paul makes it clear that it is not a list. In fact, as soon as we rely on a list to denote sin, Christianity becomes about following a set of rules, rather than living a life that reflects love, peace, and building one another up for the furtherance of God's kingdom. Consider an example. If I were to give you a gift to brighten your day, I would be furthering the kingdom by building up your sense of being loved and appreciated. But what if I gave you a blatantly generous gift in secret because I wanted you to offer me the promotion over my better qualified and deserving associate? Would that be bribery? But wait, we can take it even further. What if I gifted you in order to better my chances for the promotion so that I could properly support my young child with serious health issues? The water begins to become even murkier. We could also go back and forth indefinitely on seemingly black and white issues such as stealing and killing. What if I was a journalist being held by Isis and I steal a car in order to escape my own beheading? Or what about a persistently abused wife who shoots her husband with the gun he was planning to finish *her* off with? A list of inappropriate Christian behaviours could never cover every sin, especially since sin is so contextual and situational. And a list of "sin" examples must not get in the way of what sin really is: "*everything* that does not come from faith". In other words, sin is anything and everything that deviates or misses the mark¹² on the point of it all: *maintaining our loyalty to God and the mission He is calling us to.*

Jesus on disputable matters

Two examples from the life and teachings of Jesus will be helpful to reinforce what we have learned so far. A couple decades before all of the commotion at the first apostolic council in Jerusalem, Jesus was causing his own commotion all around Palestine. We see in the gospels that as his fame as a rabbi rose, some of the Jewish religious leaders took notice and would look for opportunities to discredit or arrest him (Matt 21:46, Luke 11:53-54). Specifically in Matthew chapter 22, we see a few examples of this. First, the Pharisees try to trap Jesus by making him side with either nationalistic Jews or Roman loyalists by asking about the imperial tax (v.17). Next the Sadducees challenge Jesus's (and the Pharisees') support of a final resurrection with a ridiculous question about seven dead husbands and the one wife they all have in common (v.28). Finally, we see the Pharisees team up with an expert in the Torah to try and stump Jesus with a really great question. "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (v.36)

Here we should pause to recognize the significance of what they are asking in verse 36. Of the 613 commandments in the Law of Moses, some were thought to be light (contextual observance) and others heavy (strict observance). Because the Law could not cover every

¹² The Greek word translated as "sin" is *hamartia* which literally means "missing the mark".

possible situation or context, sometimes observing one law meant breaking another. They want to know how Jesus prioritizes the behaviour list, the list that has served Israel since the time of the Exodus, that was meant to help maintain their covenant with God (direct their faith and practice of worship). But this question was commonly debated amongst the Pharisees, so perhaps they were hoping to trip Jesus up in a way that would contradict teachings he had already given, or maybe they were just trying to drag him into a circular debate. But Jesus answers in a very traditional way, which does not allow for any challenge¹³, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

It is not Jesus’s answer that is so radical, rather it is his follow up comment, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Jesus is not merely summarizing the Law here (this he does earlier in Matt 7:12), he is presenting a challenge. Jesus says all the other 611 commandments actually *kremannumi* (literally hang or suspend), on these *two*. He is teaching that in everything you do, *Agapēseisi* (you will love), because if you do not, then you may as well not even bother with any of the other laws. Does this sound familiar? It parallels our second principle. *If we must choose between rules or love, choose love*. The gospels show us over and over again, when challenged by the teachers and experts of the Law, Jesus points to what really matters (Matt 12:1-7, 15:1-11, Mark 2:15-17, 3:1-4, Luke 7:37-47, 10:25-37, 11:37-52, 18:9-14 parallel verses not included). And there is no better display of Jesus teaching what really matters, than in the next example.

The second illustration from Jesus’s life and teaching that will move our discussion forward, and our final scripture reflection, is found in Jesus’s most famous sermon in Matthew’s gospel chapters 5-7. Some people may regard the Sermon on the Mount as just a great list of directives for Christian faith and practice, but this would be overlooking the revolutionary thing that Jesus is doing. Jesus frames the intent of his sermon when he says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (5:17). Jesus is not only saying he is the living embodiment of what the Law of Moses and the OT prophets had been pointing towards for hundreds of years, he is setting up his audience to *hear* what the Law had been meaning all along. We do not have the space in this paper to walk through the entire three chapters so a few key scriptures and points will have to suffice.

The first thing to notice is that Jesus is reframing what it means to observe the Law. He begins each section regarding the Law with the phrase, “You have heard that it was said [insert commandment here] but I tell you...” In other words, “you may believe this about the law, but let me show you what it really means...” Remember the example about killing earlier? It is

¹³ Wright, N. T. *Matthew for everyone. chapter 16-28*. London: SPCK, 2014.

Jesus's first reframing, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment" (5:21-22). See how Jesus avoids a debate about what constitutes just or unjust killing? He goes directly to what matters, which is the condition and motives of the heart.

A little later in verses 43-48 we see an even more glaring example of how the Israelites had *missed the mark* on following, none other than, the second greatest Law we mentioned earlier. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" First of all, allow me address the elephant in the room. Nowhere in the Law and the Prophets does it teach to hate your enemies. Notice Jesus is not saying "you have read..." or "the Law says..." this is because he is not quoting it, he is addressing how the Israelites have come to interpret, and hear the Torah taught.¹⁴ This is why Jesus's teaching was so revolutionary to Jews, and why he made so many enemies amongst the religious leaders. He was challenging the traditional (and warped) interpretations of a self-serving religious elite. This group had rationalized hate and ethnic prejudice from a commandment about love! It is probably why Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, because some Jews had figured out a way to reduce the amount of love and mercy they needed to show, by increasing the requirements of what constituted a neighbour. Talk about missing the mark on what really matters! Talk about losing your loyalty to God and the mission of being a blessing to all the nations (Gen 12:1-3, Gen 28:14). This should sound familiar. It is our third principle: *our practices must reflect our loyalty to God and the mission He is calling us to*. Jesus not only corrects the misinterpretation of this commandment but he flips it on its head to remove the opportunity to get it wrong, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (44-45).

The real sin appears to be, of at least some of the Israelites (or where they really missed the mark), that they became so focused on properly interpreting the list of the 613 rules that they missed what really matters. The Sermon on the Mount represents a plethora of disputable matters that Jesus refuses to debate on. Rather he goes to the heart of each issue. It is not about the act of adultery, it is about the lust in your heart (5:27-28). It is not about choosing a level of truthfulness, but being trustworthy (5:33-37). It is not about when, where and how much you give to the needy, it is about caring for the poor (6:1-4). I am sure you get the idea by now; Jesus is not concerned with the details, he is concerned with the heart. He is not concerned with *what* you do, but *why* you do it. This sounds an awful lot like our first principle:

¹⁴ John Stott, Sandy Larsen, and Dale Larsen. *A Deeper Look at the Sermon on the Mount: Living Out the Way of Jesus*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Connect, 2013. p.95

each believer has the freedom to hold their own personal conviction and is accountable for that conviction to God and only God.

What is human flourishing?

Before we move into the implications of our scripture study, I would like us to reflect on what this all means for our understanding of *human flourishing*? And by *flourishing* I mean, living up to our God-given and Jesus-led potential for life, relationship, and mission. In his closing comments from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautions that his new way of observing the law (what we would consider the new covenant) is not an easy road (7:13-14). "...wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction... but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life..." I am sure we all desire to *flourish* in the abundant life that Christ has come to offer (John 10:10).

So how do we ensure that we *hit the mark* of the narrow gate on the road to life? This question is problematic when it comes to secondary issues for the following reason. There seems to be a general fear among many who believe in the doctrine of sin, that if we do not properly follow the rules then we may end up missing that narrow, "good" gate. And in fact, if we do not help others to follow the rules, not only will *they* enter the wide and "bad" gate, but they may lead *others* astray along with them. This is the sort of thing that happens when a dad wants to take a shortcut on a family road trip. He thinks his route *may* save time, but he's sure they will arrive at their destination in the end. On the other hand, the mom can only think about the possibility of getting the whole family completely lost. We can see how this frame of mind may have little space for secondary issues and could narrow what constitutes flourishing behaviour. For just as I may "miss the mark" in one area where you hit it, flourishing may look like something different for you than it does for me. In other words, behaviour and decisions that bring you life, love and purpose, may be different than what brings the same for me. It will be important for us to reflect on this as we move towards integrating the themes we have been working on so far.

Summary so far

- Principle 1 Each believer has the freedom to hold their own personal conviction and is accountable for that conviction to God and only God.
- Principle 2 If we must choose between rules or love, choose love.
- Principle 3 Our practices must reflect our loyalty to God and the mission He is calling us to.

PART 2 – Theological Integration

Why same-sex relationships is a secondary issue

First of all, when it comes to *sexuality*, it may be helpful to suggest what is *primary* before we discuss what makes same-sex relationships *secondary*. If we dig a bit deeper into the creation account example from earlier, we learn that God created man and woman to procreate (1:28), but also to experience together some kind of ultimate intimacy as “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Even for those that do not read the creation account literally, there can be little dispute over how the Bible portrays an overarching theme of normative sexual practices between a married man and woman.¹⁵ Therefore, I admit that same-sex relationships do appear to contradict this primary biblical theme. However, we also must recognize that gays and lesbians who seek a marriage connection within a same-sex relationship, have no bearing on this primary belief about sexuality. What I mean is, no one is suggesting that God did not originally design man and woman to become one. But what God originally designed is not in question because we do not live in the “garden” anymore. Instead of trying to get back into it, we must consider what is now most important on the outside. For as long as they have existed, gays and lesbians have been impeded from experiencing the significant “oneness” that heterosexuals have been so accustomed to. The reason same-sex relationships are a secondary *dialogismōn*, is because the primary doctrine of God’s original design for sexuality remains unchallenged, even when a minority choose to accept a variation or different interpretation of it. Not only does it leave God’s original design for sexuality alone, it does not challenge any other core tenet of the Christian faith¹⁶. For Christians to give grace in this area, even when they may disagree on the theology, does not damage the gospel but reinforces its themes of unconditional love, and God’s intent for humans to experience ultimate intimacy through a committed monogamous relationship.

But what about...

Let us take some time to answer a few burning questions for those who may be struggling at this point. First, “***What about those clear scriptures that condemn homosexuality and group it together with other detestable things?***”¹⁷ I think we all would have to admit that the true interpretation for the Bible’s directive on same-sex relationships is in dispute, and has no signs of becoming resolved any time soon. Especially since there are very committed, intelligent, deeply reflective, gay/lesbian *and* straight Christians that interpret the authoritative

¹⁵ Although we have examples of polygamy in the OT, we know that it was culturally accepted at the time, but not ideal, and Jesus reminds us of that in Matthew 19 when he is teaching the Jews on the true intent of marriage.

¹⁶ By core tenet I am referring to the non-negotiables of faith that represent God’s meta-narrative that is communicated from start to finish in the scriptures. Take one out and the whole thing collapses.

¹⁷ Notice I am not including the scripture references on purpose to avoid entering into debate.

scriptures on these verses quite differently. **“OK, but what happens to our message of right living if we compromise on this one sin?”** Remember what we have learned so far regarding sin. We need to be careful about judging behaviour based on a list, lest we lose sight of what really matters. **“Yeah but then people will justify things like pornography or pedophilia.”** I can say with some certainty that when we place pornography or pedophilia alongside what is most important in the kingdom, they completely miss the mark. Therefore, in irreconcilable secondary matters that do not detract from the overall message of God’s word, *believers must be given the freedom to hold their own personal conviction and are accountable for that conviction to God and only God.*

“But shouldn’t we be teaching gas/lesbians the way to fullness of life in Christ?” Again we must remember that much like beauty, flourishing is in the eye of the beholder. **“But they are being deceived”** you may say. Perhaps, but what does Jesus teach about those that find the narrow “good” gate, “By their fruit you will recognize them...” (Matt 7:16). We must be careful what we are basing our judgment on, of what constitutes flourishing. In my experience, I have seen a number of same-sex attracted, passionately committed Christians who were slowly dying inside, even to the point of contemplating suicide. That is, until they accepted their homosexuality, and for some, flourished only after experiencing the intimacy that comes from lifelong committed partners.

Finally, **“But what does homosexuality really have to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols?”** Not a whole lot, unless you consider what eating sacrificed meat meant to those that had an issue with it. Some of the more traditional Jews felt it was a deal-breaker for acceptance into the community of followers of The Way, even though Paul knew it should not matter. Can we see the correlation now? Perhaps the largest struggle that gays/lesbians have experienced (besides any inner struggle over their own sexuality), has been acceptance. Acceptance first within society, then amongst friends and family, and lastly within the church. Is it possible that the Church has been overly focused on rules, at the cost of demonstrating love? Even in matters that make us wildly uncomfortable (and I am still not suggesting we have to agree on the matter), *if we must choose between rules or love, choose love.*

What is the church’s mission within new creation?¹⁸

In a moment we will conclude with implications of designating same-sex relationships to secondary status, but before we do, we will need to discuss our final theological influence. I have saved mentioning it until now, but as Jesus was teaching the new way of the kingdom, in his famous sermon discussed earlier, he also taught a new prayer; “Our Father in heaven,

¹⁸ For further reading on reframing mission within new creation see, N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church*. New York: HarperOne, 2014. And Jonathon R. Wilson, *God’s good world: reclaiming the doctrine of creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.

hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:9-10). The primary goal of the Church must be to participate in this new kingdom. Christ’s life, death, resurrection, ascension and gift of the Holy Spirit are not meant as a means for us to get off the planet and into heaven, but as a means for us to become agents in the process of bringing heaven to earth¹⁹. I recognize this point as a theological can of worms that we have no time to uncap and properly gather up. The main thing we need to carry with us forward in this discussion is that advancing the kingdom is our number one priority. It is *not* saving souls (in the traditional fire & brimstone evangelical era sense), or building big churches, or making sure we and others are following the rules. It *is* participating with God in saving people from sadness and loneliness, and building loving communities, and making sure there is justice for the least among us, and bearing the image of God through our love and grace to the wider world.

What this means for the Church’s role in God’s redemptive plan

This final section conveys the practical implications of delegating same-sex relationships as a secondary theological issue that is left for each believer’s own reasoning between them and God. First of all, some may assume that FBC’s former lead pastor preached in support of same-sex relationships because he was personally motivated by the fact that he himself has two same-sex attracted children (a fact he shared from the pulpit). I would agree that he was personally motivated, but I would argue that the motivation came after multiple months of prayer and deep study and from his profound loyalty to God and the mission He is calling us to. This motivation was heightened by a conference that he and his wife attended where they experienced the immense brokenness within the Christian LGBTQ community. Meeting young people who had been rejected by their own parents because of their sexual orientation had a powerful impact on what they felt mattered. Churches must be vigilant in conveying tolerance (in its best sense) towards the LGBTQ community, not because we wish to appear forward thinking, but because we are focusing on what truly matters. It is much more important that a gay or lesbian person feels loved, accepted and recognized as a whole and complete person, than whether or not they know our position on same-sex relationships. Practically speaking, the widely accepted official stance among many evangelical churches, “welcoming but not affirming” does not practically convey this kind of acceptance.

Secondly, churches need *not* feel pressured to *affirm* same-sex relationships. This is because tolerance is a two-way street. I suspect that 2000 years ago when the leaders of the first apostolic council were drafting their letter to the Gentiles, some of them did not agree with their own directives. Hence why Paul was not committed to enforcing them. So why did they endorse it? I believe more than focusing on rules, the ancient council was concerned with

¹⁹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope: rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church*, p. 201

church unity. This too needs to be of interest when considering same-sex relationships. It is unclear at this time whether it is “affirmers” or “non-affirmers” (or anyone for that matter), who are weak in the faith. Regardless of this, consideration must be made by both sides to work towards what is mutually beneficial for building up the kingdom. This will require an intentional balancing of policy, not to keep the peace, but to foster it.

A third practical implication of categorizing same-sex relationships as *dialogismōn* is that it should not be any church member’s agenda to endorse one side or the other. This includes pastors *and* congregants. Not that the conversation should be avoided, quite the contrary. As a secondary issue, churches should feel free to maintain open dialogue around same-sex relationships without fear of agendas and the need to choose sides. This dialogue cannot be for the purpose of resolving differences (although that is a possible outcome), rather it would be to advance unity and co-mission in ministry areas and policies surrounding same-sex relationships.

Finally, I wish to convey the importance of the task at hand for the Church. For years, the wide Church has generally used theology as a justification to turn its back on (and in some cases also be part of) countless injustices towards the LGBTQ community.²⁰ We have chosen rules over love. This has been at incredible cost to the gospel of love and an area where the Church, as well as myself, has completely missed the mark. Some will have noticed by now that I have avoided disclosing my personal stance on same-sex relationships. I suspect the non-affirmer, who considers same-sex marriage a sin, would wager I affirm same-sex marriage. On the other hand, those that affirm same-sex attraction as a God-condoned sexual orientation, would guess I do not. Herein lies the heart of what is at stake. A rift of mistrust is embedded within this subject preventing any advancement. A major focus of the Church’s role in God’s redemptive plan must be to create generous space of acceptance for the LGBTQ community, working to restore trust and build rapport. We must move beyond “loving the sinner”²¹ to a place where we love the LGBTQ person because they are wonderfully and beautifully made, and they have every opportunity to convey the image of God through their loyalty to Him and participation in the mission God has called us all to. This is what truly matters behind the *dialogismōn* of same-sex relationships.

²⁰ In recent times, the ministry *Exodus International* may be the most relevant example.

²¹ “Love the sinner hate the sin” is a condescending phrase to LGBTQs that is not compatible with a stance that considers same-sex relationships as disputable.

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