

Seven Christian responses to gay marriage

The first step in navigating your way through any complicated topic is to work out what the main approaches are and try (as best you can) to identify what is appealing about each position, as well as what might be a weakness. In our efforts to think through the fraught topic of same sex marriage, the Centre for Public Christianity has developed the following brief guide to seven approaches we've encountered amongst Christians wrestling with this topic. It does not claim to be exhaustive. It cannot capture every nuance. But we thought it might still be helpful to describe the various perspectives in a simple, convenient format, and invite readers to evaluate their own position in light of the alternatives.

1. Innovators: moving beyond scripture

Innovators enthusiastically support same sex marriage. They do so with what they hold to be a generous moving beyond the Bible's teaching. For some this will be justified on the theologically liberal grounds that the Bible is a historically-conditioned document which contains some limited human teachings (hard Innovators may go so far as to accuse parts of the Bible of being wrongheaded and harmful). For others, this moving beyond Scripture is seen as a freedom granted by the Holy Spirit himself, as he moves the church into deeper expressions of love. Love, after all, is seen as the true heartbeat of Scripture.

Innovators may be vulnerable to the question of whether their approach to the Bible is too radical a departure not merely from 'fundamentalist' readings of Scripture but from the approach to the

Bible found in all three historic forms of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant). It may also be asked whether 'love' in the Bible can so easily be set against God's moral demands.

Eg. Prof Bill Loader, Michael Gungor (Liturgists Podcast)

2. Reinterpreters: reading the Bible afresh

Re-interpreters also support same sex marriage by offering fresh readings of key biblical texts. They interpret the criticisms of same sex activity found in Leviticus, Romans, and 1 Corinthians as criticisms only of pagan cultic practices or abusive forms of sexual activity. Since gay relationships today are seen as bonds of love, not acts of idol worship or violence, Scripture does not forbid them. In fact, it endorses them.

Reinterpreters may be vulnerable to the claim that their readings of Scripture owe more to revisionist attempts to make the Bible's teaching more palatable than to the insights of mainstream linguistic and historical scholarship.

Eg. Matthew Vines, Rob Bell.

3. Conceders: admitting a 'secular' good

Conceders maintain the classical vision of marriage (as the bond between a man and a woman in hope of establishing their own family) but see this as a calling for believers not unbelievers. They concede that same sex marriage can be a secular good, since it may build stability in relationships, extend human rights, protect children, and so on. They regard the biblical vision of marriage not

as a public good for all humanity but as a special sacrament of the church.

Conceders might be asked if they have sufficiently grasped the way Genesis 1-2 presents the marriage of man and woman as a 'creational' good for all humanity, not just a special covenant for believers.

4. Retreaters: strategically withdrawing from the debate

Retreaters hold the classical vision of marriage, and in theory they oppose gay marriage. However, they suggest that the church has no business agitating against same sex marriage and should strategically retreat from this fraught issue. For the sake of Christ's honour—or, for some, because it is all too complex and painful—Retreaters believe that the church should do everything it can to throw off the 'moral police' mantle. It should instead seek to build communities that stick to 'genuine gospel issues', and serve and bless the world.

Retreaters may open themselves up to the criticism that by going silent on an important issue like marriage/family they are in effect denying that God's way for relationships revealed in Scripture is a common good stitched into the fabric of creation and intended for the blessing of everyone.

5. Persuaders: changing minds through argument alone

Persuaders uphold the classical view of marriage, and oppose same sex marriage, but they do so only through public persuasion, not through lobbying or attempts to block legislation. They make clear at every opportunity that the Church has no special seat at the table and no particular right to tell anyone what to do. They oppose political machinations, preferring to avert gay marriage



through the force of good arguments about the logic and benefits of the classical idea of marriage. Persuaders tend to feel that they can significantly influence the debate if given adequate opportunities to make their case.

Persuaders may be accused of losing the political vision and courage of the great Christian social reformers, such as William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King, who employed every available tool for the common good.

6. Befrienders: supporting friends through a bad decision

Befrienders are very similar to Persuaders, except that they judge that the argument against gay marriage has already failed—in culture if not yet in legislation—recognizing the powerful social currents that altered Western sexual ethics from at least the 1960s. They look for opportunities to explain why the Church's long-held teaching on the subject, while now out of step with society, is more fair-minded than is often supposed. They freely acknowledge that the classical case has probably already been lost. They feel that the most important goal going forward is civic friendship between Christians and wider society. Befrienders do not 'support' gay marriage, but they conduct themselves like a best friend who, while disagreeing with her friend's life decision, nonetheless chooses to walk alongside her as she pursues her own path.

Befrienders may face the same criticism leveled against Persuaders (that they lack political vision and courage). In addition, they could be vulnerable to the accusation that they have conceded defeat too early and are perhaps even unwittingly fast-tracking the move toward gay marriage in Australia.

7. Preventers: stopping a tragic social mistake

Preventers oppose same sex marriage through all legal means, including persuading, lobbying, boycotting, and legislative deals. They do so on the grounds of same sex marriage being a grave social misstep with irreversible tragic consequences for society, families and, in particular, children. Like the great Christian social reformers of the past, such as William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King, Preventers insist that the stakes are too high to do anything but seek to prevent gay marriage through all available methods.

Preventers may be asked whether there is enough publicly available evidence of the harmful effects of gay marriage to expend the energy, and claim the analogy, of the anti-slavery and civil rights movements of the past. They may also be criticised for potentially conveying to wider society an impression that the Church is more interested in morality than the gospel of God's grace.

Naturally, not all of the above approaches to gay marriage can be equally plausible. We are certainly not advocating relativism about gay marriage. Nevertheless, endeavouring to understand and appreciate the full spectrum of views is an important preliminary step in carefully evaluating your own.

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