

Why San Francisco's City Church is Wrong About Sex

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The senior pastor and elders of San Francisco's evangelical City Church will no longer require members to abstain from homosexual practice, so long as the homosexual activity occurs in the context of marriage. According to a [letter](#) written by senior pastor Fred Harrell on behalf of the Board of Elders, "We will no longer discriminate based on sexual orientation and demand lifelong celibacy as a precondition for joining. For all members, regardless of sexual orientation, we will continue to expect chastity in singleness until marriage."

"Our pastoral practice of demanding life-long 'celibacy,' by which we meant that for the rest of your life you would not engage your sexual orientation in any way, was causing obvious harm and has not led to human flourishing," the letter said.

As a church inspired by Tim Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and founded in the Reformed tradition, City Church is supposed to give preeminence to Scripture. Instead, on the matter of homosexual practice, the Pastor and Elder Board gave preeminence to their judgment regarding what conduces more to human flourishing and, oddly, to a scripturally misguided book written by former Vineyard pastor Ken Wilson called *A Letter to My Congregation*. The letter recommends it to church members for showing, "great empathy and maturity to model unity and patience with those who are in different places on this conversation, all the while dealing honestly with Scripture."

Wilson contends wrongly that the biblical indictment of homosexual practice is limited to exploitative relationships with adolescents, slaves, and temple prostitutes, as though these were the only forms of homosexual practice known to persons of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. In fact, adult-committed relationships in the ancient world were widely known, with early Christians and rabbis forbidding even adult-consensual marriages between persons of the same sex as abhorrent acts.

We receive indication that Paul did not have only exploitative or promiscuous acts of homosexual practice in view, given (1) Paul's appeal to a nature argument in Rom 1:26–27; (2) his strong intertextual echoes to Genesis 1–2 and the Levitical prohibitions when citing homosexual practice (Rom 1:24–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10); (3) the unqualified character of his indictment (including an interdiction of lesbianism in Rom 1:26); and (4) the fact that even some Greco-Roman moralists (to say nothing of Jews and Christians) rejected homosexual practice absolutely.

The best biblical scholars who have studied extensively the issue of homosexual practice, including advocates for homosexual unions (such as William Loader and Bernadette Brooten), know that the scriptural indictment of homosexual practice includes a rejection of committed homosexual unions.

Wilson also contends that Paul's approach of tolerance toward matters of diet and calendar in Romans 14 should govern the church's actions on homosexual practice. For Wilson, homosexual practice is an *adiaphoron*, a "matter of indifference," over which Christians can and should agree to disagree. Yet Paul never relegated matters of sexual purity to the classification of *adiaphora*. On the contrary, he repeatedly warned converts that unrepentant participants in sexual immorality—including homosexual practice, incest, adultery, sex with prostitutes, and fornication—would not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Thess 4:3–7; 1 Cor 5; 6:9–10; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:3–5).

In the context of Romans, there can be no question of Paul regarding homosexual practice with the same moral indifference as matters of diet and calendar. This is obvious from the beginning of his letter, where Paul in 1:24–27 treats sexual “impurity” (Gk. *akatharsia*) in general and homosexual practice in particular as egregious instances of suppressing the truth about the way the Creator made us. It is also clear from the middle of the letter, where Paul in 6:19 repeats the term “impurity” as a description of behaviors that Christians must now either give up or face the loss of eternal life. Finally, it is evident from the last stages of the letter, where Paul in 13:13 includes “sexual misbehaviors” (Gk. *koitai*, literally “lyings”) among acts that believers are required to put off (a term that calls to mind Paul’s reference to arseno-koitai in 1 Cor 6:9 as a particular instance, “men lying with a male”).

As the Apostolic Decree indicates (Acts 15:20), in the early church no self-professed Christians who actively and impenitently engaged in sexual immorality (*porneia*) could become a member. Sexual offenders who were already members were put on church discipline, to be sure as a remedial rather than a punitive measure (1 Cor 5).

The same scriptural justification City Church offers to treat as permissible homosexual sex in the context of what City Church deems a marriage could be used to say that incest is acceptable so long as it occurs in the context of a “marriage” between consenting adults. At Corinth the solution for the incestuous man was not to marry his stepmother but rather to cease from sexual intercourse altogether with his stepmother. A homosexual “marriage,” like an incestuous “marriage,” merely celebrates and regularizes (i.e. renders long-term) the abhorrent sex. Marriage does not make unnatural acts more natural.

Although the City Church letter appeals to Jesus’ mission to outcasts as a basis for jettisoning a male-female requirement for marriage, it is difficult to claim that the Jesus we encounter in Scripture would have countenanced homosexual sex in the context of a “marriage.” Jesus appealed to the two-sexes requirement for marriage (and thus for all sexual activity) given in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as the foundation upon which all sexual ethics must be based, including the limitation of two persons to a sexual union. Just as Jesus did not reach out to exploitative tax-collectors in order to justify their exploitation of the poor, so too Jesus did not reach out to sexual sinners in order to provide a platform for impenitent sexuality. He reached out to both groups in order to call them to repentance so that they might inherit the very Kingdom of God that he was proclaiming. That is true love, not the impersonation of love now being peddled by City Church leadership.

The words of the risen Christ in Revelation 2–3 are apropos here: “Remember, then, from where you have fallen and repent and do the first works. But if not, I am coming to you and I will move your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent. . . . In this way likewise, even you have those who hold tightly to the teaching of the Nicolaitans [who promote sexual immorality]. So repent. But if not, I am coming to you quickly and I will wage war with them by means of the sword of my mouth.” The one who has ears to hear ought to hear.

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This article has been updated to correct an inaccuracy about the size of City Church.

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