

Same-Sex Marriage as an Ascetic Practice in the Light of Romans 1 and Ephesians 5

By: [Eugene F. Rogers](#)

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Abstract:

This article presents same-sex marriage as an ascetic practice and answers objections to same-sex marriage from Romans 1 and Ephesians 5.

Keywords: Asceticism | Ephesians 5 | Homosexuality | Romans 1 | Romans 11 | Same-Sex Marriage

Article:

I. Marriage is an Ascetic Practice

The issue of marriage for same-sex couples, as for cross-sex couples, is whether God can bind us together for life, to prepare us for life with himself; whether life with another can prepare us for life in Trinity. This is because our true end is in no human other, but in God. Sexuality and marriage are practice for this: that my destiny lies in Another whom I cannot control: this is the mystery that Paul calls a profound one. This preparation is an ascetic enterprise; the marriage vows make it so: 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.' Asceticism, properly understood, does not mean 'giving things up'; it means a spiritual discipline or training whereby lesser goods serve greater ones; it runs the race or seeks the pearl of great price. Marriage vows echo, and according to the Russian tradition derive from, monastic vows, including chastity ('forsaking all others'), poverty ('for richer for poorer', 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow'), and stability ('till death us do part').¹ As Chrysostom wrote, 'Perfect spouses are not inferior to monks; they can manifest greater virtues than the monastics.'² Children may arrive, as the U.S. book has it, 'if it is God's will', and belong in the context of the ascetic enterprise. In this sanctification it is not so much we who act as God who catches us up into a parable of the one who loves, one who returns love, and one (the Spirit) who witnesses and guarantees the love of two – so that at weddings even the congregation, exercising the witnessing and warranting office of the Spirit, anticipates our

sharing in the Trinitarian life. Such is the high ascetic calling that the Eastern Orthodox interpret the marriage crowns (which survive in the Common Worship blessing, ‘Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts and a crown upon their heads’) as crowns of martyrdom. This is no new theory of marriage, but one explicit in Eastern Orthodoxy and implicit in the marriage vows.³ The ascetic view of marriage treats it not as self-satisfaction but, Christlike, as self-donation.⁴

No one has seriously argued that same-sex couples need this training in sanctification any less than cross-sex couples. Because this is true, the burden of proof must shift to those who oppose the sanctification of same-sex couples. Two arguments now sustain the opposition to including same-sex couples in this enterprise: the Romans 1 argument and the complementarity argument (men and women are made for one another), which rests on Genesis and Ephesians 5. I turn first to Romans 1, which does not, of course, appear in the marriage rite, but hovers in the background, and then return to how the marriage rite, following the New Testament, forms Genesis in the light of Ephesians.⁵

II. Romans 1 Repeats an Ethnic Stereotype that Paul Explodes in Romans 11

Since 1963 – when Krister Stendahl published ‘The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West’ – New Testament scholars have been taught that Romans is not about individuals but about groups: Jews and Gentiles. Luther’s application of Romans to the Reformation question of faith is just that – an application, inspired perhaps by the Holy Spirit in Luther, but not intended by Paul. If so, it qualifies as what the Middle Ages would call a tropological interpretation, not a literal one. Passages that appear to speak of human beings in general do not in fact speak generically but name the conjunction of Jews-and-Gentiles. Everything refers to Jews and Gentiles, separately or together. The question is always germane in every passage of Romans what group Paul is talking about, Jews or Gentiles. This question has transformed every part of Romans interpretation, except one: the passages about sexuality and gender in Romans 1.

If we ask, however, whether the language in Romans 1:26 and 11:24 traditionally translated ‘contrary to nature’ applies to Jews or Gentiles, the answer is immediately clear. The language applies to Gentiles. It applies to them in both places. In Romans 1, it belongs to a traditional Jewish stereotype against Gentiles. In Romans 11 – where the same language reappears – it belongs to a horticultural metaphor, according to which God grafts Gentile branches into a Jewish olive tree.

The question is, why would Paul repeat Jewish ethnic stereotype against Gentiles, not gingerly, but in the strongest terms? The genre in Romans 1 is not ethics or exhortation; the genre is salvation history. The charge of same-sex activity is in any case no independent moral charge, but a *consequence* of Gentile worship of graven images, whereby God pairs dead images with non-procreative sexual practices so that Gentiles will die out. But this is not, of course, what Paul

sees happening in his day. Rather, Paul sees God saving those same Gentiles without the usual marks of salvation from idolatry, which are circumcision and keeping kosher. Paul wants to know what God is doing with Jews and Gentiles. Why is Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, gendering Gentiles here as (my word for ‘in excess of nature’) kinky? How can insulting his converts be in his interest?

The answer, as usual, is that Paul finds himself in the midst of controversy. Jewish eschatology supplies Paul with two scenarios. In Plan A, the Messiah will come, the Gentiles will acknowledge the God of Israel as the one true God, and they will do so by becoming circumcised and keeping kosher. In Plan B, the Messiah will come, the Gentiles will acknowledge the God of Israel as the one true God, and they will do so *without* becoming circumcised or keeping kosher. Paul thinks he has *empirical evidence*, in his converts, *that God is following Plan B*. The Messiah has come; the Gentiles are acknowledging the God of Israel as the one true God; and they are manifestly doing so without circumcision or keeping kosher.

This puts Paul’s Gentile Christ-followers in an awkward position. Are they Jews or non-Jews? What kind of a misfit is a Gentile follower of the God of Israel? Each *ethnos* is supposed to follow its own god. How can these follow somebody else’s God, the God of *Israel*, without taking the visible marks of Israel?

Converts feel this tension. They would like to prove their zeal. They would like to take on Jewish law. Paul, like rabbis after him, discourages Gentiles from taking on Torah. It is a good thing, but it is not for them. Rival preachers – such as the one in Galatians – take a more straightforward position. Christ-followers, trying to worship the God of Israel, ought to follow the Scriptures. Paul’s own letters were of course not yet Scripture, and Paul did not have the gospels to go by. Scripture demanded circumcision and kashrut. Paul’s rivals seemed to have the better case.

Such preachers also had ethnic stereotype on their side. Gentile converts, proving their zeal, did not want to be anymore those ‘dirty’ Gentiles with their filthy sexual practices. But Paul has a different interest. He needs for Jewish and Gentile Christ-followers to get along *without becoming alike in circumcision and kashrut*. He wants them to live side-by-side, as we see in Chapter Twelve. The Greek for side-by-side is the preposition *para*, as in paramedic and parallel. The New Testament uses it elsewhere in such words as parable (a story with its interpretation beside it) and Paraclete (the advocate who stands beside the believer). Paul wants the Gentiles to be (I invent a word Paul does not use) God’s para-people, the people who, alongside Israel, follow Israel’s Messiah, and, without circumcision or kashrut, miraculously worship Israel’s God. This is the same preposition – ‘alongside’ – as in the phrase *para phusin*, beside or in excess of nature. It is no accident, therefore, that Romans 1, 11, and 12 abound in *para* compounds. Whether Paul personally approves or disapproves of same-sex sexuality – and there is no reason to suppose he approves – he must meet the stereotype head-on. If Paul wants Christ-followers to get along as circumcised and uncircumcised (which is a sexual mark), he must confront the rival preachers. He must respond to the claim that Gentile sexuality is paraphysical.

For Paul intends something much bolder: to reclaim that concept of something beyond what's natural as a description of God's salvation of those same Gentiles.

Paul has never been accused of cowardly preaching. He knows that such language has power that cannot be ignored, but must be harnessed and re-purposed. Paul does not need his converts putting down their former selves and insulting prospective proselytes out of an anxiety to resolve their ambiguous social status. Paul must expose their anxiety in order to lance it. In a first rhetorical shock, Paul stereotypes his hearers to their faces. He gets them nodding their heads, yes, those dirty Gentiles with their filthy sexual practices – precisely to slap them with whiplash in verse 2:1. Paul takes back his stereotyping of Gentiles in a second rhetorical shock.

Addressing the audience in the person of the rival teacher, Paul exclaims, 'Therefore you have no excuse, sir – who do you think you are! – when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things' (2:1). 'Anthrope', as a noun of direct address, is no abstract universal for the human being, but shows contempt for an interlocutor: You, sir! My fine fellow! Gentiles hoping to secure their worship of the God of Israel by adopting anti-Gentile stereotype find themselves caught in Paul's trap.

It's hard to know exactly how much of the rival sermon Paul agrees with, exactly where he gets off the bus. But we know that he pivots on one phrase, the phrase that first appears in Chapter One and re-echoes with a related meaning in Chapter Eleven. That phrase, *para phusin*, will not have been forgotten over the long interval. It rings clearly across ten chapters. It prepares a third rhetorical shock. Here again the agent is God and the objects of God's action are Gentiles. The context, however, is only related to sexuality: this time it is horticulture. The Greek word for 'graft,' *paraphuas*, is related to and sounds very like *para phusin*. Paul deliberately avoids it so as not to give the surprise away, but so that his own phrase, *para phusin enekentristheis*, grafting in excess of nature, will explode in the mind of the prepared hearer as a pun. He does this to heighten the shock. Now God is acting contrary to nature. And not by typical grafting, either; it gets worse – or better, depending on your point of view. Typical horticultural practice would be to graft sweet, domestic olives on to more vigorous wild rootstock. God does something much stranger. God grafts the wild, good-for-nothing olives onto the domestic rootstock. The sober gardener of Eden now plays the giddy plant-fancier, promiscuously inserting unheard-of branches into unaccustomed clefts where they hardly seem to belong. God takes on that Gentile characteristic – acting in excess of nature – in order to save those same Gentiles. Loving Israel would be natural; Paul uses biological metaphors for that. Loving Gentiles is beyond nature; Paul uses para-biological metaphors for this: adopted children, fellow (rather than natural) heirs, grafted branches, teaching strangers to call God 'Father.' This time it is God, rather than the Gentiles, who does something kinky. So Paul, malice aforethought, shocks his hearers again with the strangeness of God's grace.

That is what the church misses – the still mostly Gentile church! – if we insist on assuming that sex-talk is always about sex. Paul's sex-talk is about something else: ethnic stereotype transformed into another proclamation of the gospel. It is our own Gentile salvation that we

misunderstand, if we mis-hear how Paul reclaims the language of sexual stereotype for his purpose. It is God who acts paraphysically, beyond God's 'natural' love for Israel, to save us Gentiles.

Only modern interpreters miss the point. For Romanos the Melodist – the greatest hymnist of the Greek tradition – it is the incarnation itself, symbolised by the Virgin Birth, that is most profoundly paraphysical. For Thomas Aquinas, it is the Spirit of adoption who works paraphysically – and with no blushing modern avoidance of sexual metaphor. On the paraphysical implications of Paul's account of how to become a child of God, Aquinas comments:

And this is clear from the comparison to physical children, who are begotten by physical semen proceeding from the father. For the spiritual semen proceeding from the Father, is the Holy Spirit. And therefore by this semen some human beings are (re)generated as children of God. 1 John 3:9: 'Everyone who is born of God does no sin, since the semen of God remains in him [*semen Dei manet in eo*]' . (*In Rom.* 8:17, #636)

III. It Does Not Take a Cross-Sex Couple to Represent Christ and the Church

Even Romans is receding as an argument against same-sex marriage these days. The argument that recently carries the most weight is the complementarity argument, which arises from German romanticism: men and women are made for one another. This argument does not arise from ancient views of sexuality, which did not see two complementary sexes, male and female, but one perfect sex (male) of which women were defective examples. The complementarity argument gains its visceral power from a picture: the man and woman standing together in Eden, at the altar, atop the cake, and in the household. It is the New Testament epistle to the Ephesians 5:31–2 that seems to display this picture and extend it to cosmic scale. The author quotes Genesis, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh,' and explains, 'This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself ...' The explanation in Ephesians uses gendered language and has two parts, moral (love your wife as yourself) and symbolic (the man and woman represent Christ and the Church). The question is, does the Ephesians passage limit marriage to cross-sex couples either morally or symbolically?

Morally, the Ephesians passage describes the duties of the spouses in two ways, hierarchically ('wives be subject to your husbands', 5:22) and reciprocally ('love your wife as you love yourself', 5:31). The point of the hierarchical language, however, is to overturn hierarchy: 'husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (5:25). Hierarchy overturned, the reciprocal language remains: love your spouse as you love yourself. This echoes in the strongest terms Jesus's second commandment, love your neighbour as you love yourself. The moral point of marriage, therefore, is to teach the love of nearest neighbour.

Marriage becomes a school for sanctification, just as the marriage vows define it. The mystery is that marriage points to the love of God as it enacts the love of neighbour. Marriage in Ephesians thus bears witness to both of the great commandments: it represents the love of God as it enacts the love of neighbour. The church needs the witness that same-sex couples also offer to the two great commandments.

But *can* same-sex couples ‘represent’ the love of God? Do the symbols work? After all, Ephesians genders Christ as male and the church as female. Can two women or two men represent Christ and the church? The church, gendered female in Ephesians, has always consisted of men as well as women. Indeed the all-male priesthood has throughout most of Christian history represented the church as male. A man as well as a woman can represent the church.

Christ, on the other hand, is fully human and fully divine. As the divine Logos, the Word of God, Christ is beyond gender as its source. As human, Christ has solidarity with us and makes atonement for us as *anthropos*, human, not as male. If Christ’s humanity represented only male characteristics, then women would not be saved, according to the principle that ‘what is not assumed is not redeemed’. But Christ assumed humanity, not maleness alone.

The Middle Ages had a clearer vision of this than the present. Clement and the Cistercians alike pictured Christ as giving milk to believers from his breasts. Cistercians also imagined crawling up into the wound in Christ’s side as into his womb, there to be re-birthed from him. That was how to be born again in the Middle Ages. It showed that because Christ assumed *humanity*, female characteristics were not foreign to him. Indeed, Christ’s body is male in Jesus and female in the church. Therefore, women may represent Christ as well as men.

The author of Ephesians is using typology. In typology, earthly realities do not define heavenly realities, even if we learn earthly things first. Rather, heavenly realities redefine earthly ones. The privilege of marriage is to represent Christ and the church. They are the defining reality, not we. We must conform to them, not Christ to our marriage customs. Typology has certainly been used to reinforce gender roles – but that is not its logic. Its logic is to open them up. Men as well as women can represent the female-gendered church. Women as well as men are saved by the male-gendered Jesus, whose humanity embraces both. Therefore not only cross-sex couples may symbolise Christ and the church, but same-sex couples also. After all, it cannot be that every woman needs to be completed by a man, as Mary was not; nor that every man needs to be completed by a woman, as Christ was not.

Paul puts it very carefully. In Christ ‘there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free, no “male and female”’ (Galatians. 3:28). Note the conjunctions. The first two pairs have no/or. The third pair is different. It is different because Paul is quoting the Genesis line about ‘male and female’. He negates, not the parties, but the pair. In Christ – to put the negation in modern terms – there is no compulsory heterosexuality. The human goal is not complementarity but Christ. In Paul’s

interpretation of Genesis, as in that of Ephesians, sexuality yearns first of all for God, the Other I can neither avoid nor control; my yearning for a human being only reflects, and through the arduous training in sanctification leads to, that higher reality.

Does this mean that difference does not matter? By no means! There is enough difference to go around. Same-sex couples encounter the difference that matters – the one that they can neither avoid nor control, that challenges and consummates them – in someone of the same sex. This is a difference that trains them in virtue; that makes them better. It is a moral difference. The difference that matters is the moral difference. Same-sex couples are those in whom God transforms eros into charity by joining each for life with someone of the same sex – just as cross-sex couples are those in whom God transforms eros into charity by joining each for life to someone of the opposite sex. It is the apposite, not the opposite sex that matters – but in both cases the sex still matters. It just matters in more ways than one.

The orientation of the human being is toward consummation in the triune life of God, who satisfies the desire of every living thing. And God is in Christ orienting human desire toward Himself. Sexual orientation, therefore, must be a christological condition. It orients sexual desire towards opportunities for growth into faith, hope, and charity. Those opportunities have the best context for training in a life-long union with someone of the apposite sex. Marriage, for those so called, is a mechanism for turning longing into charity. It provides profound, visceral, deeply embodied opportunities to represent and carry forward the incarnation of Christ. For ‘the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast’ (a parable that threatens those who fail to celebrate with ‘darkness and gnashing of teeth’). Its anticipation in the eucharist is likewise, because Christ establishes it with a marital remark: ‘This is my body, given for you.’

Notes

1. See Evdokimov (1985), pp. 65–84.
2. *In Epist. ad Ephesios Homilia XX*, PG 62:147, quoted in Evdokimov (1985), p. 164.
3. Evdokimov (1985). Cf. also Zion (1992), who does not apply his own analysis to same-sex couples, but treats them as exceptions to it. Sarah Coakley (2012) has also treated vowed relationships together.
4. The language of self-donation belongs to the nuptial hermeneutics of John Paul II (2002). David Matzko McCarthy (2002) applies this to same-sex relationships, with references to the eucharistic theology of Bernard Cooke.
5. This essay condenses arguments developed over the last ten years at greater length or with fuller notes elsewhere. For Part I, see Rogers (2005). For Romans, see Rogers (2009, 2011a). For Ephesians, see Rogers (2011b). All of these themes show up in a document prepared for the House of Bishops of the U.S. Episcopal Church and published with a conservative reply, a

response by the authors to the reply, and reactions by seven scholars worldwide in Good et al (2011). An essay like this inevitably raises the question ‘What about single people?’ This is a good question, as long as it is not meant to imply that same-sex oriented people have *ipso facto* a vocation to singleness. A non-reductive theology of singleness is greatly needed, especially since we have both a single saviour and critiques of marriage in the New Testament and the early church. But that is a task for another day and for someone else.

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Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and author of *Sexuality and the Christian Body*.