

Understanding Diverse Perspectives on Same-Gender Relationships and Marriages

Thoughtful, prayerful, and committed Christians often hold differing positions on the affirmation of same-gender relationships and marriages within the church. Our positions are often impacted by our understandings of sexual orientation, the nature and means of God's revelation, and our personal experiences.

In listening to each other, it is clear that our understanding of the origin of our sexual orientations is often a significant contributor to our positions on the affirmation of same-gender marriages. Sexual orientation, commonly understood as the primary direction(s) of an individual's emotional and erotic attraction(s), is different from an individual's gender identity (the sense of one's identity as a girl or boy, man or woman, for example). Many see sexual orientation as an in-born dimension of the human experience, the product of genetic, pre-natal, or other biological factors. In this sense, we are attracted to those of the same or another gender because we are "born this way," or otherwise influenced by factors outside of personal control. This is sometimes referred to as the "essentialist" position because one is seen as essentially heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. In contrast, others hold the "constructivist" position, which asserts that sexual orientation is a social construct that shifts over time and across communities. Not surprisingly, multiple positions exist on same-gender marriage within both essentialist and constructivist circles. Thus, while these positions often significantly impact *why* we hold a position, they do not always dictate *which* position is held.

Further, our understanding and prioritizing of the sources and authenticity of God's revelation often have a significant impact on our affirmation of same-gender marriages. Specifically, one's understanding of the nature and authority of scripture; the traditions of the church; and reason, logic and science as means by which God reveals God's self often significantly influence one's position on same-gender marriage. Again, these positions often impact *why* we hold a position, but do not always dictate *which* position is held.

Our personal experiences also make significant contributions to our positions on the affirmation of same-gender marriages. In addition to our own experiences as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and heterosexual individuals, we are also shaped in the communities of which we are a part. These communities include our families of origin and creation, faith families, kinship networks that extend beyond family ties, friendships, and the larger social, political and occupational communities of which we are a part. These personal experiences and relationships are often determinative of our positions in this area of faith life.

Discussions of same-gender marriage often resort to dualistic approaches. This is understandable, given that communities decide whether or not to legitimize same-gender marriages (to consecrate or not). However, this dualistic approach misses the richness and complexity involved in individual and community decisions about same-gender marriages. For example, Johnson (2006) identified seven theological views of same-gender relationships

observed in Christian communities, all of which embrace a Trinitarian view and offer explorations of human nature, forgiveness, and wholeness. These include *Prohibition, Toleration, Accommodation, Legitimation, Celebration, Liberation, and Consecration*. Of the seven positions, three represent non-affirming viewpoints, one a critique of non-affirming viewpoints, and three represent affirming viewpoints. Thus, individuals who hold non-affirming viewpoints often do so for differing reasons; the same can be said for those who hold affirming viewpoints.

In sum, it is clear that faithful Christians of good will often reach differing conclusions on the support of same-gender marriage within the church; we do so prayerfully and with wholehearted commitments to the God of love.