

**Discerning the Will of God Concerning Homosexuality and Marriage, Romans 12:1-2
by John Piper (Bethlehem Baptist Church) - August 8, 2004**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Let's begin where we left off on June 26. We focused on Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

I argued that Paul's exhortation, "Do not be conformed to this world," is one side of the tension—the paradox—of the Christian life. Non-conformity to the age in which we live. The other side is expressed in texts like 1 Corinthians 9:22, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." And 1 Corinthians 10:32-33, "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." There's the tension of Christian living in fallen American culture. Don't be conformed. Nevertheless don't give offense, try to please, become all things to all people so as to save some.

I called these two sides of our Christian life the pilgrim side and the indigenous side (borrowing the terms from Andrew Walls). Pilgrims (or as the Bible calls us, "sojourners, exiles") know they don't fit in. This is not our primary home. We are out of step, out of sync with the culture. On the other hand, we are called to be indigenous, taking on, in some measure, the culture where we live. If we simply conform to the culture, we would not be salt and light to the culture. If we don't conform at all, the salt would remain in it the salt shaker and the light under a basket.

Summary of the Christian Life

So we summarized the Christian life like this:

1. Yes, we are indigenous! But we are also strangers, pilgrims.
2. Yes, there is confrontation with the world! But also missionary adaptation.
3. Yes, there is separation from the world! But also cultural participation.
4. Yes, we are in the world. But no we are not of the world.
5. Yes, there is a sense and a measure in which we become all things to all people. But we are also not conformed to this world!

Four Reasons for This Tension

And we developed four reasons this tension—this paradox—exists for the Christian.

1. Creation is the Lord's, yet fallen and in need of redemption.
2. Christ is incarnate—indigenous—yet crucified as an unwelcome pilgrim.
3. Conversion to Christ is by justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law, yet always followed by the process of sanctification.
4. The kingdom of God has already come in Jesus Christ, but the final consummation of kingdom is not yet here.

The Balance of Conviction and Compassion

Today, I will try to apply all of this to homosexuality and the highly charged political situation we are in. You know I cannot say all that needs to be said in one message. So let me make sure in advance that you are aware of the Desiring God internet site, desiringgod.org, because there you can read or hear the past sermons on homosexuality and you can read the official statement of the church called, "Beliefs about Homosexual Behavior and Ministering to Homosexual Persons." I believe it is a beautiful combination of biblical conviction and personal compassion.

That is the balance I long for us to have in the leadership and the people of Bethlehem Baptist Church. I heard this issue dealt with in a church on vacation and groaned with how imbalanced the message was. I don't want us to be like that. We will continue to say what the world, by and large, will not believe, namely, that it is possible to describe homosexual behavior as sinful, perverse, abnormal, and destructive to persons and culture while at the same time being willing to lay down our lives in love for homosexual persons. In fact, we say something even more radical and unbelievable to the world, namely, that you must believe homosexual behavior is sin and harmful in order to love homosexual persons. Because God tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:6, "[Love] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth." If you deny the truth that homosexual behavior is sin, but instead approve of it or rejoice in it, what you bring to the homosexual person will not be love—no matter how affirming, kind, or tolerant. Our aim is the biblical combination of conviction in God's truth and compassion for God's creation.

The Connection Between Discerning the Will and Worth of God

The reason homosexuality comes up at this point in Romans 12 is because of the phrase in verse 2, "by testing you may discern." "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God." There is one Greek word in the original language behind the phrase, "testing you may discern" (*dokimazein*), and it occurs previously in Romans 1:28 in the context of Paul's dealing with homosexuality. That's why I decided to deal with it just here, over five years since the last time we dealt with it there.

Romans 1:28 says, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” The word “acknowledge” here has that same Greek word behind it. The idea is, “Since they did not see fit by testing to discern and acknowledge and approve of God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” In other words, by putting 12:2 and 1:28 together, we see that foundational to discerning the will of God is discerning the worth of God—the worth of having God in your knowledge. The renewal of mind that has to happen in order to discern the will of God (in Romans 12:2), is a renewal that embraces the worth of God—that loves having God as the sun in the solar system of your ideas and values and choices and emotions, so that while he is there in the center, everything stays in its proper orbit.

The Sexual Exchange Is an Echo of the Idolatrous Exchange

And you can see whom Paul is talking about in Romans 1:28 (when he says, “God gave them up to a debased mind”) by reading verses 26 and 27, “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.” In verses 26 and 28 Paul says that God “gave them up” to these dishonorable passions and behaviors. He calls homosexual behavior an “exchange” of the God-ordained natural relations for the dishonorable unnatural relations.

What is most profound and crucial to see in the flow of Paul’s thought is that this exchange—women exchanging men for other women, men exchanging women for other men—is an image and echo of man’s exchange of the glory of God for images like man himself. Verse 23: “[They] exchanged [ëllaxan, similar word as in verse 26, metëllaxan] the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man.” Or here it is again in verse 25: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” In other words, Paul treats the unnatural sexual exchange as an expression of the exchange of God’s glory for the glory of ourselves. When the glory of God ceases to be our supreme treasure, that distortion will be expressed in distortions of our sexual pleasure. And homosexuality is just one of the disordered forms that exchanging God leads to—not the only one.

The Renewing of Our Mind

So I conclude that not being conformed to this world (Romans 12:2) involves a renewed mind that reverses the exchange of the glory of God for the glory of man. It involves a change of mind that embraces God as its supreme treasure and authority. And out of this renewed mind, with God as our supreme treasure and authority, we are able to by testing discern that homosexual passions are a tragic disorder of God’s creation, and homosexual behavior is a sinful departure from God’s will—just like heterosexual lust, fornication, and adultery.

Why Marriage Cannot Be Between Two Men or Two Women

Which brings us now to the highly charged political situation we are in at the moment. I have in mind the relationship between homosexuality and marriage. There are two biblical reasons why marriage cannot be between two men or two women.

1. The Will of God for Marriage Was Expressed in Creation

One is that Jesus confirmed God's will in creation when he said in Matthew 19:4-6, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." That's the Bible's teaching and the Bible's assumption from cover to cover. Marriage is one woman and one man becoming one flesh by covenant and sexual union.

2. There Is No Such Thing as Homosexual Marriage in the Eyes of God

The other biblical reason marriage cannot be between two men or two women is that, on the one hand, the Bible defines homosexual behavior as "dishonorable" and "shameless" and "contrary to nature" (Romans 1:26-27), but on the other hand the Bible says that marriage is to be "held in honor" (Hebrews 13:4). Marriage does not produce shame. And marriage is not contrary to nature. There is therefore no such thing as homosexual marriage in the eyes of God. And there should not be in the eyes of his people—no matter what the state says.

The Constitutional Democracy of the United States

The government under which we presently live is a constitutional democracy. Under God the highest law of this land is the Constitution. It begins "We the people of the United States . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." In other words, the laws that govern this land under God are made by the people. A process of elected representation with a House and a Senate is the means we have created to put national laws in place. The executive branch exists to see that these laws are carried out. The Judicial branch exists to provide the final interpretation of the Constitution in settling disputes.

The Concept of Meaning and Truth Has Changed

What has changed dramatically in the last fifty years is the concept of meaning and truth in our culture. Once it was the responsibility of historical scholars and judges and preachers to find the fixed meaning of a text (an essay, the Constitution, the Bible) and justify it with grammatical and historical arguments, and then explain it. Meaning in texts was not created by scholars and judges and preachers. It was found, because the authors put it there. Authors had intentions. And it was a matter of integrity to find what a writer intended—that was the meaning of the essay, the Constitution, the Bible. Everybody knew that if a person wrote "no" and someone else creatively interpreted it to mean "yes," something fraudulent had happened.

But we have fallen a long way from that integrity. In historical scholarship and in constitutional law and in biblical interpretation, it is common today to say that meaning is whatever you see, not what the author said or intended. To get right to the point, today the Constitution is being “amended,” whether we like it or not. That is, courts are finding there what never was there in any of the authors’ minds, namely, a right to marriage between two men or two women. This kind of so-called interpretation creates out of nothing a definition of marriage that has never existed. In other words, the question is not whether the Constitution will be amended concerning the meaning of marriage and the rights of homosexual people to marry; the question is simply how it will be amended. Will it be by the means established by the Constitution itself? Or will it be by the Supreme Court creating a meaning for the Constitution which was never there in the authors’ farthest imaginations?

What Then Should Christians Do?

What then should Christians do? I must be very brief. We should manifest the tension of being pilgrims and being indigenous. Sojourners and citizens. Bound for heaven and caring for earth. Let me say a word about each side of this tension.

1. The Indigenous Side

On the indigenous side we should be involved with the processes of law-making. We should pray and work to shape our culture, its customs and laws, so that it reflects the revealed will of God, even if that reflection is only external and dim and embraced by unbelievers with wrong motives. Thus we should pray and work that marriage would be understood and treated in our land and by our government as a lifelong union of one man and one woman.

If someone asks, Why do you impose your religious conviction on the whole culture, we answer: all laws impose convictions on a culture. And all convictions come from worldviews. They don’t come out of nowhere. People argue for laws on the basis of a certain view of the world. What needs to be kept clear is that voting for a law (a prescribed or proscribed behavior) does not mean voting for the worldview behind it.

A person with an atheistic worldview may argue that, since there is no God, human life is the most sacred thing there is and therefore it is appalling to kill little humans in the womb. Or a Christian may argue that, since there is a God, humans created in his image ought not to be killed in the womb. Therefore a pro-life vote may not be a vote for either worldview. The same thing is true for the meaning of marriage. The way laws (and amendments) come into being in a pluralistic democracy like ours is the convergence of enough different worldviews on the same prescription for behavior—when enough people with different worldviews have the same idea of how we ought to behave.

Being an indigenous Christian in that setting means working to shape the culture into behaviors that reflect the revealed will of God, even if only externally, and dimly, and embraced by mercy for very different reasons than our own.

2. On the Pilgrim Side

On the pilgrim side of the tension, we make our Christ-exalting, cross-centered, soul-saving biblical worldview known with brokenhearted joy. Joy because Christ really is the sovereign Lord of the universe and will establish justice and purity in due time out of this fallen world. And brokenhearted because we share in the pain and misery of what sin has brought on this world. “We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). The pilgrims groan with the whole creation as we witness to our true homeland: the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

We do not smirk at the misery or the merrymaking of immoral culture. We weep. Being pilgrims does not mean being cynical. The salt of the earth does not mock rotting meat. Where it can, it saves and seasons. And where it can't, it weeps.

Being Christian pilgrims in American culture does not end our influence, it takes the swagger out of it. We don't get cranky when evil triumphs for a season. We don't whine when things don't go our way. We are not hardened with anger. We understand. What's happening is not new. The early Christians were profoundly out of step with their culture. The Imperial words of Christ were ringing in their ears: “You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13). Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44).

That was a time, and this is a time, for indomitable and tearful joy and unwavering ministries of mercy. The greatness of Christian pilgrims is not success but service. Whether we win or lose, we witness to the way of truth and beauty and joy. We don't own culture, and we don't rule it. We serve it with brokenhearted joy and longsuffering mercy, for the good of man and the glory of Jesus Christ.

To that end we must be transformed in the renewal of our minds. We must be pure in heart, trusting Christ.