

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Same-Sex Marriage

The USA Congress passed Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, and Section 3 defined marriage for the purposes of federal law as “a union of one man and one woman.” Of course, this had been the usual definition for thousands of years, since Genesis 2:24 said, “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife.”

In 2013 the USA Supreme Court ruled that Section 3 violated the Fifth Amendment. Then in 2015, it ruled that refusing marriage or refusing to recognize marriage to same-sex couples violated the Fourteenth amendment.

Some citizens were elated that their battle to make such marriages legal and available was successful. Others were aghast that such a thing could happen in their own culture. Missionaries may now find themselves in difficult situations. Some nationals believe that America is a Christian nation and wonder how it could allow same-sex marriages. They may also wonder if such marriages should be allowed in churches in their own countries that also allow such marriages. Other nationals in countries in which homosexual behavior is a crime may wonder if their laws should be changed. Before considering these questions one needs to know what the Bible says.

## What does the Bible say?

The Bible is not silent on the subject of homosexual behavior. The first mention of it occurs in the early chapters of Genesis during the time of Abraham. Abraham’s call to a different culture is in Chapter 12, and Sodom is

mentioned in Chapter 13 where the Bible states “The men of Sodom were wicked and sinning greatly against the Lord.” Sodom’s wickedness is reiterated, and Abraham pleads for Sodom in Chapter 18. The nature of their sin becomes clear in Chapter 19 where men from all over the city ask Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out so that we can have sex with them” (verse 5). This event is the reason that the word “sodomy” is often used to describe homosexual behavior between men.

Such behavior appears again in the Old Testament in Leviticus 18. After several verses defining incest, verse 22 states, “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” Leviticus 20:13 goes on to say that in such cases, both men must be put to death.

In the New Testament the first chapter of Romans also deals with the topic. “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another...God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones....Men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men” (verses 24-27).

## Whatever became of sin?

Karl Menninger, one of the founders of the Menninger Clinic, noted that by the 1960s the word “sin” rarely occurred in American culture. Actions were described as being disgraceful, evil, corrupt, prejudicial, harmful, and so forth, but they were seldom called sinful.

In 1973, Menninger published his book, *Whatever Became of Sin*. He noted that

particular sins may become crimes, mental illnesses, or just accepted in society as normal behavior. Apparently homosexual behavior has been regarded as each of these in much of Western culture.

When an action is labeled as a sin, the problem is dealt with by the church and people such as priests, pastors, and youth ministers. These individuals offer opportunities for confession, repentance, and forgiveness leading to salvation. If sinners take advantage of these opportunities they have a new life in Christ. Sinners who reject these opportunities remain in their lost state.

## Became crime?

Many sins have become criminal as well as sinful. For example, the sins of stealing and murder became crimes, as well as sins, when cultures passed laws against them. When treated as crimes, the state deals with them through the justice system in which police officers, prison guards, attorneys, judges, and parole officers deal with them instead of the church and the clergy. The officials of the justice system arrest, incarcerate, counsel, parole, and treat.

Many countries passed laws to make homosexual behavior a crime as well as a sin. Nearly all states in the USA passed sodomy laws. Therefore homosexual behavior was handled by the justice system.

## Became mental illness?

Some sins became mental disorders, as was the case with homosexual behavior. When that happened, the medical system in which psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, and clinical social workers became the ones to deal with such behavior. They treated these

mental disorders with mental hospitals, drugs, and therapies of all types.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association is the standard in the USA. When it was first published in 1952, “Homosexuality” was listed as one of the 106 mental disorders. Thus, when Menninger wrote his book, homosexuality was not only a sin and a crime but also a mental disorder.

## Became alternate lifestyle?

During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some cultures revised definitions of homosexuality as a crime and/or a mental illness. In the USA most states decriminalized homosexuality during this time, and the last 14 states did so when the Supreme Court declared sodomy laws unconstitutional in 2004.

Many of the countries in the Western world have also decriminalized homosexual behavior; however, in 2013 it was still a crime in 77 countries—mostly in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Homosexuality remained a mental disorder in the DSM for more than three decades before a committee in the American Psychiatric Association removed it in 1973. The American Psychological Association followed in 1975, and the World Health Organization in 1990. Homosexuality was changed into just a sexual orientation, not a mental disorder.

## Issues to Consider

For thousands of years, people usually remained in their own cultures most of the time, and cultures changed very

slowly. However with changes in technology interaction and integration between people and governments of many nations have led to globalization and rapid changes in cultures.

**First. Many cultures are changing rapidly.** Sins may become crimes or mental disorders, then not crimes or mental disorders, and then crimes or mental illnesses again. For example, India de-criminalized homosexual behavior in 2009 and re-criminalized it in 2013. Thus about 16% of the world's total population saw the law changed twice in only six years.

**Second. Western culture is becoming less Christian.** Christianity and the Bible influenced many Western nations as they developed.. This influence continued from the founding of the USA to shortly after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as shown by the following acts of Congress in the 1950s. Congress passed the following legislation between 1954 and 1957.

- Added the words “under God” to the pledge of allegiance.
- Approved the addition of the Congressional Prayer Room which includes the words “This nation under God” across the top of the stained glass window
- Approved legislation to require all paper money to include “In God We Trust” (It had been on all coins for more than a century).

**Third. A US Supreme Court ruling does not change what is sinful or not.** Such a ruling does not change God's definition of marriage. Such rulings change what is legal or illegal in a culture but have nothing to do with what is sinful or not, what is moral or immoral, etc. Same sex couples may legally marry, but homosexual behavior is still sinful.

Unfortunately, even different Christian groups do not agree on what is sinful. Most Roman Catholic and Evangelical Protestant

groups maintain that homosexual behavior is sinful. Liberal Protestants often do not.

**Fourth. God still forgives people who sin, even sexual sins.** The early verses of John 8 tell about the woman caught in the act of adultery. The teachers of the law pointed out that the Law of Moses gave them the right to stone her to death. However, Jesus insightful response resulted in everyone leaving. Then Jesus told the woman he did not condemn her either, but she should go and leave her life of sin.

#### What can one do?

Missionaries serving in countries where homosexual behavior is illegal are unlikely to face major questions about issues regarding same sex marriages. However, if nationals keep up with events in the USA, missionaries may face questions about how this can be true in a “Christian” nation. Of course, information about cultural changes presented earlier may help answer that.

Missionaries serving in countries where same-sex marriages are legal may need to explain the differences between something being legal and something being sinful. Ideally, behaviors that are morally wrong would be illegal, but in reality, we live in a world where that is seldom true. This is especially difficult when Christians disagree, and it is probably best to encourage nationals to read their Bibles to find out what is sinful.

In either case, missionaries must remember that all individuals, including homosexuals, still need love, and sinners still need forgiveness as well as changed lives. Missionaries can still pray for those they are serving and disciple those who repent and believe.

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