

THE CENTER FOR
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SHOULD CHRISTIANS ATTEND A
SAME-SEX WEDDING CEREMONY?

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Introduction

This is one of the most common questions that pastors and leaders are being asked. And, to lay my cards out upfront, I don't think there is one clear black-and-white-answer to this question—even for those who uphold a traditional view of marriage. To be clear, everything I say below will assume that God has designed marriage to be a one-flesh union between two sexually different persons. My goal is not to tell you exactly how to respond to the question above, but to provide a framework for how to respond faithfully, in light of what the Bible says about marriage. In the end, I believe there might be multiple responses to this question that are faithful to a traditional Christian ethic of marriage.

Facilitating a Same-Sex Wedding?

As a licensed minister, I could never facilitate a same-sex wedding. While attending a wedding carries various levels of approval and affirmation (which we'll discuss below), facilitating a same-sex wedding is intrinsically validating. The pastor or priest carries vested authority from both the state and the church to declare that the couple should be married. And I don't see how anyone, who believes that sex-difference is an intrinsic part of what marriage is, could authoritatively declare that the same-sex couple is now truly married.

However, it's important that pastors and priests be consistent in what weddings they facilitate. Personally, I wouldn't facilitate any wedding that I don't approve of, such as the wedding of a believer and unbeliever, which is clearly prohibited in Scripture. Some denominations, however, operate within a parish system, where a pastor's job is to marry and bury anyone in the parish. If the denomination approves of same-sex marriage, then this will present a different set of challenges unique to pastors and priests of these denominations.

The rest of this paper will focus on whether one should attend a same-sex wedding ceremony.

Attending a Wedding: Christian or Non-Christian?

The first thing we need to ask is whether the people getting married claim to be Christians. If they don't, then this should make it easier for a Christian friend or relative to attend the wedding. Paul's words to the Corinthians are relevant here:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral...I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral...[But] what business is it of mine to judge those outside the church...God will judge those outside. (1 Cor 5:9-13 NIV)

Paul is not talking specifically about attending a same-sex wedding ceremony, but he does give a framework for distinguishing between the sins of believers and unbelievers. In short, we should feel much more freedom to hang out with unbelievers and not cast judgement on their behavior (for God is the one who judges), while Christians have a responsibility to hold fellow believers accountable for their sin. "If someone is caught in a sin," Paul says, "you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently...Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1-2). This doesn't necessarily mean that Christians should never attend the ceremony of a same-sex couple who claims to be Christian (see below), but it does give more freedom to possibly attending a

wedding of a couple who doesn't claim to be believers.

Apart from distinguishing between believers and unbelievers, here are some additional things to consider.

Seven Things to Consider

First, there aren't any clear biblical prohibitions against attending a same-sex wedding. Attending a wedding is similar to the "disputable matters" that Paul discusses in Romans 14. Put differently, our question at hand belongs in the so-called "gray area" of Christian obedience. Now, some things aren't necessarily sin or morally wrong, but they may be unwise. The sin/wisdom distinction applies both to attending a same-sex wedding or not attending. It may be unwise for someone to attend, or it may be unwise for them to not attend. The next 6 points will help you determine if it's wise or unwise to attend, based on your specific relationship with the couple (or person) getting married.

Second, whatever you decide, you need to be consistent in your convictions. If you won't attend a same-sex wedding because you believe it violates Scripture, then you should also never attend any wedding that violates Scripture. This includes believers marrying unbelievers, a believer who went through an unbiblical divorce and decides to remarry, or perhaps a couple who is sleeping together (without repentance) before they are married. Be consistent in your convictions.

When it comes to LGBT+ related questions, conservative Christians have sometimes been hypocritical. We are lenient in some areas while being stringent in others. And it has damaged our witness. We need to make sure we are consistent in how we live out our Christian convictions.

Third, what message would your attendance send to the couple getting married? In the past, attending a wedding meant you supported it without qualification. The minister would often ask the attendees: "Does anyone disapprove of this wedding?" and the audience had the authority to object. Uncle Bob might stand up and say: "I don't think Sally and Joe should get married!" and the wedding would be off.

But, for the most part, things are different nowadays. People attend wedding ceremonies for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes the attendees don't even know the couple very well, and most ministers don't ask the audience whether they approve of the wedding. All that to say, attending a wedding conveys different possible meanings. For some, it conveys unqualified approval. For others, it conveys a simple gesture of friendship. Therefore, you must ask yourself (and the couple getting married) what your attendance, or lack thereof, would convey.

If you attend the wedding, would the couple think you are suddenly supportive of same-sex marriage? Or would they view your attendance as simple loving gesture? Only you can answer this. Personally, if my attendance would suggest that I'm fully in support of same-sex marriage, then I probably wouldn't attend. But if the couple knew what I believed about marriage and didn't assume that my attendance meant unilateral support, then I might consider attending.

Seven Things to Consider (CONTINUED)

Fourth, don't worry about your reputation. I sometimes hear Christians say: "other Christians will criticize you if they hear that you attended a same-sex wedding!" And some Christians probably will, but Jesus didn't seem to care whether his actions tarnished his reputation among religious people. He "came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'" (Matt 11:19). Yet Jesus kept on eating and drinking and hanging out with "sinners." Jesus befriended sinners so aggressively that religious people thought he was one. And he didn't seem to care.

So, if you attend a same-sex wedding to show courageous love toward your gay friends, and religious people get fussy about it, then don't worry about your reputation. You're following in the footsteps of Jesus. Just make sure you understand clearly what your attendance will convey to the people getting married. If they assume your attendance means you affirm same-sex marriage (and you don't), then you're sending a dishonest signal, and Christians need to embody honesty—even if the world disapproves of our convictions. But if your attendance sends a nuanced message of grace and truth—you still believe in a traditional view of marriage but love your gay friends—then you might consider attending.

The next two points describe two sides of the relational coin. Both should be equally considered.

Fifth, if your relationship with the same-sex couple depends on whether you'll attend their wedding ceremony, then it might be a fragile and inauthentic relationship. By analogy, if you invited a Jewish friend over for an all-you-can-eat shrimp feast, and he declined, then that's on you, not him. Abstaining from shell fish is part of the Jewish religion, and you should respect this if you want to be a genuine friend to a Jewish person. In a similar way, believing that marriage is between a man and a woman has been part of the global, Christian ethic for 2,000 years (until recently in the West). If your gay friend knows you're a Christian and still asks you to attend their wedding, they should at least be aware that attending may violate your beliefs or conscience and a true friend or loved one ought to respect that. In short, you're not a bigot or a fair-weather friend if you decline. You're just trying to be faithful to your Christian ethic.

Sixth, you still should consider the long-term effects that attending or not attending a wedding will have on your relationship with the one getting married. The previous point emphasized the accommodation that your LGBT+ friend should consider making toward you. This fifth point highlights the accommodation that you should consider making toward your LGBT+ friend or relative. My friend Bill Henson encourages Christians to attend a same-sex wedding on the grounds of the long-term relationship between you and your LGBT+ friend. If you choose not to attend, this "can (and often does) yield deep and lasting relational damage.

Seven Things to Consider (CONTINUED)

Being ‘right’ for one day can damage the opportunity to be a witness for thousands of days into the future.”

Seventh, follow your convictions. If after sifting through all the pros and cons above, you still don’t feel the freedom to attend, then you should go with your conscience. However, interpreting your conscience is subjective and prone to error—you can feel that something is wrong, and yet your feelings might actually be wrong. So, make sure you cross-check your conscience with godly people around you.

Practically, if a gay friend asks you to attend, and you’ve thought through the first six points I’ve presented and you still feel like attending would violate your conscience, then you should ask some godly men and women in your life for advice. Share your heart with them, and relay to them the principles we’ve talked about in this paper. If your godly friends and leaders think you should attend, then you might want to consider their advice. Or if they confirm your reservations over attending, then this might confirm that your reservation is from the Holy Spirit.

“The Holy Spirit said to us” is much more powerful than “The Holy Spirit said to me.”

On the flipside, if you feel like you should attend, and your godly friends or leaders give good

reasons why you should not attend, then you may want to follow their advice. Again, there’s a chance your personal reading of the situation is jaded—we all need help from other mature, godly Christians to help us think through difficult questions like this one.

Attending the Wedding of Non-Christians

After thinking through the implications of attending or not attending, I would be much more open to attending a wedding ceremony of a non-believing same-sex couple. Paul's distinction between believers and non-believers in 1 Corinthians 5, along with the likely relational avenues that would be shut down by not attending, nudge me in favor of attending the wedding ceremony. If we're good enough friends to be invited to their wedding, they know I'm a Christian and know my view of marriage. My attendance might send a shocking message of love and grace and open up new vistas for the gospel to invade their lives (which often happens in the context of relationship). But again, this isn't the only faithful response, and every believer needs to cross-check their response with godly Christian leaders they trust.

It's more complicated with a gay couple that claims to be Christian.

Attending the Wedding of Christians

Without giving an exhaustive list, here are six different responses you could give to a friend who claims to be Christian, who wants to marry someone of the same biological sex. I'll list these on the spectrum of "no" to "yes," using a scenario where the person getting married is a gay sister named Rachel.

Unqualified "no."

Even if you land on an unqualified "no" response, you still need to make sure you are excessively kind in your tone, while relaying your convictions about same-sex marriage.

"Rachel, I love you so much and I want nothing more than to see you be happy. But I do believe that God designed marriage to be between a man and a woman. I don't want to send mixed signals and be dishonest about my beliefs. I'm afraid that if I attend, I'll give the impression that I support same-sex marriage, and I don't. I know this might offend you and I'm very sorry, but I can't celebrate a union that I'm convinced God does not. I really hope you understand and I would love to maintain our relationship, even though we disagree on this very important aspect of your life."

Qualified "no."

This response still advocates for not attending, but explores creative ways in which the

friend/relative can try to maintain a relationship with the person getting married:

"Rachel, thank you so much for your invitation. I'm honored that you would invite me to your wedding. You know what I believe the Bible teaches about marriage, that it's a union between a man and a woman. I know we disagree on this, but I want you to know that I love you and want what's best for you. However, I don't feel like I can attend your wedding, Rachel. I'm so sorry, but it would violate what I believe about marriage. I really hope you can respect this and not feel like I don't love you. In fact, I would love to take you and your partner out for dinner. My treat. Any place you want! I would love to get to know her because I know she's so special to you."

Let me think about it.

If you genuinely don't know whether you should attend, then don't be afraid to let your friend/relative know. This at least conveys honesty as you sort out your convictions:

"Rachel, I'm so honored you'd invite me to your wedding! I just want to be totally upfront with you. You know what I believe the Bible teaches about marriage—that it's between a man and a woman. But I also love you so much and truly want you to be happy. I'm really wrestling with whether I can attend your wedding. I know this may be painful for you, but I need to be true to

Attending the Wedding of Christians (CONTINUED)

my beliefs and I hope you can respect this. Can you give me some time to think and pray about this? I want to love you the best way that I know how, but I also don't want to be a hypocrite and betray my convictions, and I'm honestly not sure whether attending your wedding would do that. Can you give me some time to think about it?"

Attend the reception

This response navigates a middle ground by attending the reception but not the ceremony. The logic here is that the ceremony itself is a sacred event but the reception is an informal one. Attending the former might show approval of the marriage itself, while attending the latter simply shows that you value your relationship with the couple.

"Rachel, I'm so honored you'd invite me to your wedding! I just want to be totally upfront with you. You know what I believe about marriage—that it's between a man and a woman. And I believe that it would go against my beliefs about marriage to attend your wedding ceremony. But I would love to attend the reception, because I really do love you and I want you to know that I truly care for you."

Qualified "yes"

This response says yes, but makes it clear where you stand on the question of same-sex marriage:

"Rachel, I'm so honored you'd invite me to your wedding! I would love to attend, but I have to be honest: I'm struggling with whether I'd be a hypocrite in doing so. You know what I think about marriage—that it's between a man and a woman. But I also love you so much and truly want you to be happy. So, I would love to attend your wedding—I know this is so special for you, and your friendship means so much to me—but I need you to know that I believe God designed marriage to be between a man and a woman. Some of my Christian friends might think I'm crazy for attending, but I'm willing to take the risk because I love you. Are you okay with me attending, knowing my views of marriage?"

Unqualified "yes"

This view assumes that the person already knows your views on marriage, so you don't need to remind them or belabor the point:

"Rachel, I would love to attend your wedding! I'm happy that you found someone you love and I'm honored you've invited me to your ceremony. If there's anything you need, please let me know. I would love to make sure this is a special day in your life"

A Special Word to Parents

Parents carry a special relationship with their kids, which adds further complexity to the question of attending a same-sex wedding. Whatever you decide, you need to think extra hard about your decision.

Personally, I would encourage parents to attend. If you boycott the wedding, you may be right for one day, but miss the opportunity to embody Christ's love in your son/daughter's life for thousands of days to come. I've heard countless stories of the unrepairable damage that has been done to the parent-child relationship when the parent does not attend their kid's wedding. Think long term, not short term.

One grieving mother reflects on her decision to not attend her son's gay wedding:

"We were instructed not to go to our son's wedding. He has never forgiven us and will not visit us. I am a grandmother: unlike my friends, we have grand-children that we have never met. Aren't I called to reach my precious grand babies with the Gospel?...I have lost so much."

I would never ask another Christian to go against their convictions or the counsel of their leaders. At the end of the day, parents have to follow their conscience. But this one decision could make or break a long-term relationship with a person whom you have an irreplaceable relationship with. I only want them to consider the life-long magnitude of their decision.

Conclusion

I believe that all of these six options can be faithful to the biblical view that marriage is between two sexually different persons—as long as you don't send mixed signals to the couple getting married. Again, we are talking about something that's not specifically discussed in Scripture and should therefore be considered within the framework of wise/unwise and not sin/obedience. Personally, I'd probably go with something along the lines of options 2-5, depending on the relationship I had with the person or couple that invited me to their wedding. But, as always, you need to cross-check my advice with your godly friends and leaders around you.

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Our collaboration is a growing team of Christian leaders, pastors, scholars, and LGBT+ persons to serve as advisors, writers, speakers, researchers, and board members. Learn more about our collaborative team at www.centerforfaith.com/leadership.



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