

Sergius and Bacchus

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The story of Saint Sergius and Saint Bacchus is told in the Greek text known as *“The Passion of Sergius and Bacchus”* which is ostensibly set during the reign of Roman Emperor Galerius (305 to 311). The work itself may date to the mid-5th century. According to their hagiography, Sergius and Bacchus were officers in the army of Galerius, and were highly favoured by him until they were exposed as secret Christians. They were then severely punished, with Bacchus dying during torture, and Sergius eventually beheaded. Sergius and Bacchus were very popular throughout late Antiquity. Churches were built in their honour in several cities, including Constantinople and Rome. According to the story, Sergius and Bacchus were Roman citizens and also high-ranking officers of the Roman Army. However their hidden Christianity was discovered when they attempted to avoid accompanying a Roman official into a pagan temple with the rest of his bodyguard. After they

¹ Personal Biography <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/SusanBiographyPapers.pdf>

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persisted in refusing to sacrifice to Jupiter in Galerius' company, they were publicly humiliated by being chained, dressed in female attire and paraded around town. Their close friendship is strongly emphasized in Christian tradition, which has made them one of the most famous examples of paired saints. Boswell and others consider that there was a romantic relationship, and this has led to popular veneration of Sergius and Bacchus in the lesbian and gay Christian community. It has led some to suggest that this was a forerunner of same-sex marriage in the Christian Church.

The story is understood to have been in existence not later than the fifth century and it must be interpreted according to the contemporary attitude to gender and sex. Roman society viewed same-sex intercourse through the prism of subjection and domination. When that occurred between two male citizens it was only the penetrated partner, not the penetrating one, who was condemned. That was because his submission attacked the status of citizenship itself. However in contrast to this, there was no such condemnation when a male citizen penetrated a male of non-citizen status. Although Roman citizens were expected to exercise responsibility, the freedom to engage in the rape of slaves and the abuses of same-sex intercourse were accepted acts. Maintaining authority and equality between soldiers in a Roman army was even more paramount. When two soldiers engaged in same-sex intercourse the penalty for both partners was being clubbed to death. Issues of power and domination were overriding features in these relationships. Services of Adelphopoiesis or brother-making were known to exist in the early Church, and liturgies for such services have survived to the present day. They contain many elements of a marriage ceremony, but they do not proceed to the final "Crowning" stage. Many types of commitment could be made, however these ceremonies of "Brother making" demand a relationship between two equal males where same-sex intercourse is the only prohibited intimate sexual act.

From the time of the exile to the destruction of the Jewish temple in AD70 a "Pairs" culture existed in Judaism. The didactic learning processes involved in the Judean tradition promoted the creation of close Rabbinic partnerships, whose intimacies did not discriminate between friendship and love in the relationships that were formed. Like the Christian ceremonies of "brother making" these demanded a bond between two equals, in which same-sex intercourse was again the only prohibited sexual act. It can therefore be argued that these services of Adelphopoiesis affirm a Jewish tradition which was carried over to the Christian Church.

However the Jewish sages were fiercely opposed to calling these marriages. A marriage contract created a fundamentally unequal relationship which made the woman the property of the husband, and which also cemented the divisions of power, function and discrimination in these grossly socially and gender unequal societies. Marriage and betrothal were two separate stages in the forming of a relationship, and if a heterosexual equivalent is looked for one should perhaps look for betrothal instead.

The traditional teaching of the Church of England on marriage in Canon B 30 states that *"according to our Lord's teaching, that marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity"*. Unless one still wants to define marriage as a fundamentally unequal relationship between a man and a woman, what Christianity today defines as marriage would have been understood by the first century Jewish sages as betrothal. It was certainly not marriage. Christianity has therefore changed the definition of marriage into one which celebrates a loving, faithful and committed lifetime bond between two equals in which there is no prohibited loving sexual act.

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What is evident from this account and the whole of this analysis is that the concern is not specifically about sex or the act of same-sex intercourse, it is about how the abuses of power in these grossly gender and socially unequal societies give permission for extreme abuses of sex. That was notably in same-sex acts. Sergius and Bacchus could have been put to death either because their hidden Christianity was revealed, or because they contravened the disciplinary code of the Roman Army. One was tortured, perhaps to determine the physical nature of their relationship, and the other was beheaded. If this was the reason, then as high-ranking people in the army, a death penalty more exotic than clubbing might be expected.

All of this demonstrates the importance of interpreting the bible and these stories in the context of how societies understood them at the time when they first appeared. The words of Canon B12 might remain the same, but society has changed around it. The paradox is that these early same-sex relationships of Adelpoiesis have more in common with present day attitudes to marriage than any first century marriage could present. Both of them represent relationships between two equals. The main issue now is as to whether same-sex intercourse can take place within such a relationship, or if it must not? The Church of England currently permits its priests to enter Civil Partnerships provided they maintain a celibate relationship. The Roman Catholic Church still remains strongly opposed. However this relationship is close to what was understood by Adelpoiesis itself. To answer the question about same-sex intercourse it is necessary to look at the differing relationships between same-sex intercourse, power and sex, not just in societies of antiquity, but also in the socially and gender divided societies of the present day, and those societies in which gender equality is presumed to exist.

It is also important to note that discrimination against gender and sexually variant people is a socially led phenomenon and it would be a mistake to identify its cause with religious belief. A major feature of gender discrimination and complementarity comes from the way it separates the male from the female roles. Any form of gender and sexually variant behaviour which departs from the normal expectations of that society, for any purpose, challenges this distinction. The need to seek respectability and acceptance in Roman society was considered essential if Christianity was to continue to survive and bring its Gospel message to the world. However the compromises which this demanded swapped the most radical teaching of Jesus on gender and sexuality for the respectability of the Church. In its battles against the gross sexual abuses of Roman Society, all sense of the moral duality which is inherent in gender and sexually variant behaviour has been lost and a universal condemnation has been applied. These transformations have brought the Church to collude with the secular demands of society rather than to challenge them. Not only has this collusion reinforced the secular prejudices of such discriminatory societies; it gave and it still gives religious legitimacy to them. One only needs to look today at the behaviour of Daesh and Boko Haram to see how extreme this can become.

The persecution and slaughter of gender and sexually variant people, not only in Christianity but in Islam, Judaism and all other religions, states and cultures which have drawn their teachings from it has been enormous. In many African countries extreme penalties against homosexual behaviour are being advocated or applied. There is no doubt that there was a great deal of sexual abuse in first century society, where the blatant abuses of power gave permission for extreme abuses of sex. However to condemn all gender and sexually variant behaviour for the abuses of some, is akin to saying today that all members of a minority community are terrorists because some engage in terrorist acts. In the United States at the present time, senior members of the Catholic Church have been using its traditional teaching to collude with the conservative Christian right when they by denying the reality of identities and condemn all transgender people as invariably being in pursuit of illicit or depraved sex. For both social and theological reasons there is now an urgent need to reconsider the traditional teaching of the Church.

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The analysis which has been undertaken by the author uses the principles of science to test the validity of the present day teaching of the Christian Church. This demonstrates that a moral duality must exist, whereby gender and sexually variant people who express their true attractions and identities in ways that conform to the highest moral standards of their own societies are to be highly regarded, while those who misuse these relationships should be severely condemned for their acts. In the theological and historical part of this study an extended examination of the teaching of Jesus has been conducted and it is shown that it conforms to the results of the scientific study. This conclusion contradicts the traditional teaching of the Christian Church which condemns without exception every sexual and gender variant act. The outcome of this requires that the same principles of use and abuse must be applied equally to all heterosexual, cross-gender and same-sex acts. There is no toleration of any form of abusive or immoral sex. When the abuses of power are absent it is concluded that all people, transgender, transsexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual and bisexual people who attempt to live their lives in ways that fulfil the love of Christ, and who seek to express their own identities within roles that are true to themselves; must be fully accepted in their own right. All behaviour is governed by the purity of intention. There is no derogation of personal relationships, of marriage and of family life, and there is no automatic condemnation of any cross-gender or same-sex act.

The story of Sergius and Bacchus operates at different levels. From the Christian point of view the reason for their martyrdom was that their secret Christianity was discovered and the intimate nature of their relationship has long been celebrated in the Christian Church. The Passion document describes them as *"Being as one in their love for Christ, they were also undivided from each other in the army of the world, united not by the way of nature, but in the manner of faith, always singing and saying, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" They were adept and excellent soldiers of Christ, cultivating assiduously the inspired writings to combat diabolical error, and fighting vigorously in battle to defeat the enemy"*. Although Galerius was a staunch opponent of Christianity, he ended the persecution of Christians when he issued an edict of toleration in 311. Nevertheless, from the Roman point of view the pair would still be liable for the death penalty if, as members of the army, they engaged in same-sex intercourse, which was a prohibited act. Parading Sergius and Bacchus around the town in female attire was also an action of humiliation in this male dominated and gender discriminatory society. It also suggests a sexual motive for this penalty. These attitudes are the reverse of what is observed in the present day Christian Church. It is demonstrated that during the first millennium a paradigm shift has occurred. This has changed what was a condemnation based on the intention of an act into the automatic and unvarying condemnations of the actual act. It also creates the contradictions between the scientific and experiential evidence and the traditional teaching of the Christian Church. The attempts by conservative groups, such as GAFCON and others, who seek to maintain the traditional teaching of the Church, because of their belief that it truly represents the Gospel message, are instead pursuing Christian doctrines which arise from the needs of the 13th Century Church.

Attitudes to same-sex marriage, same-sex relationships and same-sex intercourse cannot be separated from the social divisions in surrounding society. In societies where gender complementarity or division is strongly enforced the prohibitions placed on these activities still have considerable weight and engaging in any form of gender or sexually variant behaviour for any purpose can still be condemned as a disordered, socially disruptive and depraved act. In societies where gender equality is adhered to people can see for themselves the love commitment and lifetime faithfulness that can be expressed in same sex relationships. They can also recognise the moral duality whereby gender and sexually variant people who express their true attractions and identities in ways that conform to the highest moral standards of their own societies can be highly regarded, while those who misuse these relationships should be severely condemned for their acts.

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Sergius and Bacchus are unlikely to have seen their relationship as one pertaining to same-sex marriage: they might instead have perceived it to one relating to Adelphopoiesis as practiced by the early Church. The relationship that Christianity recognises today as a marriage is an equal relationship between two people which has the nature of the lifetime commitments that are associated both with betrothal and with Adelphopoiesis. It is not the unequal property based contract that first century society understood. What is evident from this account and the whole of this analysis is that the concern is not specifically about sex or the act of same-sex intercourse, it is about how the abuses of power in these grossly gender and socially unequal societies give permission for extreme abuses of sex. In personal relationships where these abuses of power are absent there should not be an automatic prohibition of any loving, cross-gender or same-sex act. Arguments over the use of the word "same-sex marriage" also abound. It would of course be perfectly possible for Christianity to employ a different word to define these relationships. However its resistance to change in present day society means that this authority has been lost. Because of this it is society rather than the Church who determines which description should be used. It is these differences that are leading to schisms in the Church.

For more information on the Passion of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, see:

Boswell, John. TR: "*The Passion of Sergius and Bacchus*" Translated by Boswell from the Greek "*Passio antiquior SS. Sergii et Bacchi Graece nunc primum edita*," AB 14 (Brussels, 1895), 373-395. This text is apparently the Greek original of the Latin passion beginning "*Imperante Maximiano tyranne, multus error hominum genus possederat*," printed in the *Acta sanctorum*, October 7, 865-79, and is more ancient than the more common account of "Metaphrastes." <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs/usr/scotts/ftp/wpaf2mc/serge.html> .

For more information on relationships of Adelphopoiesis see:

Gilchrist, S. (2011): "*Issues on the Sanctity of Same-Sex Relationships*": <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/014B-IssuesOnTheSanctityOfSame-SexRelationships.pdf>.

For science based discussions see:

Gilchrist, S. (2016): "*Sex and Gender Variation in the Christian Church: Is it Not Time to Consider the Science?*": <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/226P-ConsiderScience.pdf>

Gilchrist, S. (2016): "*Science and Belief. A New Approach to Identity and Personality Formation in Early Life*": <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/218P-PaperPersonality.pdf>

For theological arguments see:

Gilchrist, S. (2017): "*A House Built on Sand? Attitudes to Gender and Sexual Variant Identities and Behaviour in Christianity and the Christian Church*": <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/231P-HouseUponSand.pdf>

Gilchrist, S. (2017): "*The Gospel of Thomas and its Impact on Gender and Sexual Variation in the Christian Church*": <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/027B-Thomas.pdf>

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