

Same-Sex Marriage was an early Christian Rite

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Early Christian rituals have been found for brotherhood unions between two men akin to 'marriage' ceremonies.

Conservative Christians may be surprised to learn of evidence that rituals for sanctification of same-sex unions predated those for heterosexual marriage, unsettling claims that the latter has always been the cornerstone of society, especially Christian society. Major research shows that marriage and "other solemnised relationships" have not always been between a man and a woman. In ancient times in many cultures marriages between two or more people created strategic alliances in and between families, for purposes such as strengthening bonds, expanding the labour force or joint enterprises. Historian John Boswell notes:

No marriages in ancient societies closely match their modern equivalents. Most were vastly more informal; some were more rigid.... No precise criteria could be specified as constituting a "legal" marriage... two people who lived together permanently and whose union was recognized by the community were "married".^[1]

He adds that love was not its essential feature, nor was sexual activity, or procreation. Polygamy was also common, even among nobility of Christian Europe.

In the late Roman Empire, 'marriage' came to be understood as the union of two people based on mutual affection ('companionate' or 'brother-making') between two — or maybe more — males or, occasionally, females.

These ceremonies appear from archives to have occurred in the Catholic Church up to the 14th century and in the Eastern Orthodox Church up to the 18th century.

Such companionate unions became prevalent coincidentally with the rise of Christianity, and may not have been considered to relate to sexual intimacy. Philosopher-historian Michel Foucault suggested that as the institutionalization of companionate marriage, with sexual partnership becoming intertwined with procreation, gave rise to official condemnation of same-sex relations within the church and government.^[2]

Nevertheless, while being formally critical of same-sex intimacy, paradoxically the Catholic Church tolerated homosexual unions, 'especially', says William Eskridge, Professor of Jurisprudence at Yale Law School, 'those within its own clergy':

Homoerotic feelings repeatedly arose between teachers and students, clerics and their fellows, and priests and acolytes, yearnings which are documented in a proliferation of love letters, poems, and stories originating from the early and high Middle Ages.' Clerics were at the forefront of this revival of the gay culture. St. Aelred, for instance, writes of his youth as a time when he thought of nothing but loving and being loved by men.[3]



Documented in Byzantine manuscripts from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, prayers established participants as "'spiritual brothers' (pneumatikous adelphous) and contained references to sainted pairs, including most notably SS Sergius and Bacchus, who were famous for their friendship." [4]

Many documents appended to Boswell's work[5] describe 'companionate' ceremonies similar to those for heterosexual marriage (indeed the indications are that they predated, and were amended for, heterosexual marriage). The community would gather in a church, and the companionate union would be blessed. This union was often made for male missionaries before their departure.

Eskridge describes the 'brother-making' ritual, extant in these archives: The ceremony started off with prayers and litanies celebrating earlier examples of same-sex couples or friends in the early Church. The couple are then girded with a single belt, signifying their union as one. They place a hand on the Gospel as they receive lit candles. The priest then reads from one of Paul's epistles (1st Corinthians) and the Gospel (John), After more prayers, litanies, the Lord's Prayer, and administering Holy Communion, the priest leads the couple around the lectern, each of them holding the hand of the other, while those assembled sing a hymn. Finally, the couple exchange a kiss, and the service concludes with the singing of Psalm 133:1 ("*Behold how good and sweet it is for brothers to live as one.*").

This early brotherhood liturgy was similar to what then became the ceremony for heterosexual marriage. There was a difference, however. The ritual for heterosexual marriage emphasised its procreative purpose, while the brotherhood liturgy focused on the companionate nature of the relationship. In an apparently important sense, though, the language of the brotherhood marriage is ambiguous. While the priest presiding prayed that God grant the couple 'a love mutual and without offense' or 'scandal', he goes on to note the fact that 'God willed to bind as brothers not only by nature but by bonds of the spirit Your most celebrated Apostles Peter, the Chief of them all, and Andrew; James and John the Sons of Zebedee; Philip and Bartholomew. You made as very brothers Your Holy Martyrs

Sergius and Bacchus, Cosmas and Damien, Cyrus and John.’ According to their hagiography, Sergius and Bacchus, who are saints, are considered by some as being lovers.

Eskridge cautions that while ‘Christianity was indifferent, if not accepting, of gay people and their feelings for a longer period of time than it had been hostile to them’.[6] We do not know just what was considered acceptable –and to whom — in these same-sex marriages: they could be recognised as excluding sexual relations. They may have been little more than send-offs for missionaries. In light of the early Church's ascetic approach to sexuality, he doubts that these ceremonies contemplated sexual unions. But he does conclude that

Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches performed same-sex enfraternization rituals for centuries, glorified the same-sex intimacy of Sergius and Bacchus, and openly published same-sex union liturgies in their official collections.[7]

Professor Boswell’s research shows that these ceremonies represented, at least, public acceptance of same-sex ‘unions’ by the early Church. Whatever the private religious beliefs and practices of those involved, the unions were a public religious recognition of living together, for social (and potentially legal) purposes.

[1] *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* 26 (1980):

[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 72-80* (Robert Hurley trans., PantheonBooks **1986**) (1984).

[3] William N. Eskridge Jr *A History of Same Sex Marriage*, 79 Va. L. Rev. 1419 1993

[4] [Enhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adelphopoiesis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adelphopoiesis) ; See also <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/2rites.asp>; and <http://www.newoxfordreview.org/reviews.jsp?did=1294-viscuso>

[5] John Boswell (1994) *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* Villard

[6] John Boswell: The Church and the Homosexual: An Historical Perspective, *Excerpts from the keynote address made by Prof. Boswell to the Fourth Biennial Dignity International Convention in 1979*.1979 <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/1979boswell.asp>

[7] *Ibid* 1497