

Some Thoughts on the Bible & Homosexuality

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I. Introductions and disclaimers

A. This is **not** an important issue in the Bible: no statement about it by Jesus (!) and only 5 passages that likely speak to it.

B. One's sexual orientation makes a difference how you read the Bible (as does gender, age, class, location, etc.). **Interpretation is an interplay between text & reader.**

C. We are talking about passages that concern homosexual *conduct* because the biblical writers had no conception of anything like intrinsic homosexuality.

D. There's no clear consensus on either the meaning of these passages, or the role these texts should play in the church. (Historically, however, Christian writers have largely viewed homosexual behavior as sinful.) In my opinion, these biblical passages have been misused to condemn and exclude homosexual persons.

E. The Bible has no single sexual ethic; rather, it shows a variety of sexual mores, some of which have changed over thousands of years.

F. The goals of this study are fourfold:

1. To help us discuss this issue with other Christians.
2. To look carefully at every passage in our Bible that might have something to say about this issue.
3. To continue to explore what it means for the church to be a community of grace. We study the bible not just to know more, but for our lives to be changed by God's high and holy Spirit.
4. To be confronted with what the Bible does and does not say about homosexuality.

G. Biblical texts about homosexuality are 4 things:

1. Extremely few in number,
2. Always negative,
3. Ambiguous in direct meaning, and
4. Unclear what claim they might have on Christian ethics today.

II. Hebrew Bible passages

- A. Genesis 19.5, the destruction of Sodom (for the entire story, see 18.16 - 19.11)
And they called to Lot, *Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.*
1. Sodom is already under sentence
 2. Hebrew word is *yada*; 10 of the 93 usages mean “sexual interaction.”
 3. Attempted gang rape of the angelic messengers, not consensual
 4. A related passage: Judges 19.22-25
- B. Sodomy defined: Ezekiel 16.49-50.
5. Rabbinical definition of “sin of sodomy”: being inhospitable with arrogant pride
 6. The term never appears in the Bible
 7. Sodomy defined as neglect of the poor: Amos 4.1,11
 8. Zephaniah 1.9 & 2.9
 9. Isaiah 1.15 & 3.9,14-16
 10. Compare Matt 10.14-15, again rejecting God’s messengers without hospitality.
- C. The Holiness Code: Leviticus 18.22; 20.13
1. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (*toevah*)
 2. If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them have committed an abomination (*toevah*); they shall be put to death.
 3. Hebrew: *Toevah*, means a very bad thing.
 4. Not in the moral law (chapter 19) section, but in with those concerning sex.
 5. No mention of lesbian sexuality
- D. “Universal” commands that we still consider immoral and destructive
1. Incest
 2. Bestiality
 3. Child sacrifice
 4. Rape
- E. Limited commands
- Sex with your wife during her menstrual period (18.19)
 - No nakedness (18.6ff)
 - Allows owning slaves (25.44)
 - Not touching an menstruating woman (15.19-24)
 - Not sowing field with two different kinds of seeds (19.19)

- No eating shellfish (11.10)
- No cutting the hair on your temples (19.27)
- No tattoos or piercing (19.28)
- No clothes with mixed materials (19.19)
- Death for cursing parents (20.9)
- Death for adultery (20.10)
- Exile or worse for sex during menstrual period (20.18)
- No BBQ pork or even touching a dead pig (11.6-8)

G. Biblical writers permitted these behaviors that we today condemn or discontinue:

- Prostitution
- Polygamy
- Levirate marriage
- Sex with slaves
- Concubinage
- Treatment of women as property
- Very early marriage (for girls, age 11-13)

H. Biblical writers condemned or discouraged other sexual behaviors that we generally allow, such as:

- Intercourse during menstruation
- Celibacy
- Exogamy
- Naming sexual organs
- Nudity
- Masturbation
- Birth control
- Semen and menstrual blood as unclean

I. No group of Christians has followed Levitical laws

1. Jews & Christians determine which of these laws still hold moral force, and which do not.
2. Augustine: Does my interpretation increase love of neighbor, or decrease it?
3. Jesus, the word made flesh: what is consistent with who he was, how lived and what he taught?
4. Challenge is to make our moral discernments about these laws thoughtfully and as consistently as possible: What do we do with other prohibitions in the same

material?

K. *Those are all the OT texts!*

II. NT passages: 2 words and one sentence

A. 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, immoral persons, idolaters, adulterers, soft men, male prostitutes, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanders and swindlers.

1. What do these words mean: *malakoi* & *arsenokoitai*?

2. Words have usages, not meanings.

3. *Arsenokoitai*: first extant Greek usage here. Later usages are male temple prostitution and pederasty.

4. *Malakoi*: Effeminate. Is this a moral category?

5. Note our inconsistencies: do we ever have church discussions about letting greedy people join the church, or about greedy people being deacons, or greedy people getting married in the church? 1000+ passages in our Bible about the dangers of greed.

B. 1 Timothy 1.9-10: "... men slayers, immoral persons, male prostitutes, men stealers (kidnappers or slave traders), liars, perjurers ..."

C. Jude 7

1. Is this passage a part of this discussion?

2. *Sarkos heteras* means literally "other flesh," (angels?) not "same flesh"

D. Romans 1.26-7: the heart of the matter: homosexual behavior as an example of impurity.

1. Here's my translation of the two Greek sentences in Romans 1.24-27: For this reason [idolatry], God surrendered them in the desires (*epithymiai*) of their hearts to uncleanness so that they would dishonor (*atimazo*) their bodies among themselves--these people who exchanged (*metellaxan*) the truth of God for the lie and revered and worshiped the creation instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever, amen. (1.24-25)

2. Some translations take *epithymiai* to be **lusts**, and Paul does use it negatively often, most often as **covetousness**. It carries the basic meaning of **desires**, and Paul sometimes uses it positively (e.g., 1 Thes. 2.17) to mean **eagerness**. To be sure, it's not meant positively here, but I rendered it neutrally, so that we don't decide the question of Paul's stance about homosexual acts before we examined it thoroughly.

3. Paul says here that God dealt with the desires of the Gentiles by handing them over to uncleanness.
4. Note how Paul is talking about a **change** in which he understood to have been taken as a consequence of idolatry. People who formerly desired the opposite sex now commit homosexual acts. Paul is writing about Gentile culture as a whole.
5. On account of this [the sin of idolatry], God surrendered them to passions (*pathos*) of dishonor (*atimia*), for their females exchanged (*ellaxan*) the natural use for that over against nature (*para physin*) and in the same way the males too, having left the natural use of the female, burned with their desire (*orexis*) for one another, males accomplishing shamelessness (*aschemosyne*) with males and receiving the due recompense (*antimisthia*) of their error (*plane*) among themselves. (Rom. 1.26-27)
6. Paul uses in both sentences the language of social dishonor: **shamelessness & dishonor**. KJV renders it **that which is unseemly**. Note that he does not call homosexual intercourse sinful, or any synonym equal to it.
7. It's hard to say exact what Paul means by saying it is "over against nature." He sometimes uses *physin* to mean either **continuity with its past** (as in Rom. 2.14 & 11.24) or **widespread social usage** (1 Cor. 11.13-15). I doubt he means **widespread social usage** since the Greek world accepted homosexual intercourse.
8. What does Paul mean by *recompense* and *error*? The common interpretation is that the *error* is homosexuality, and the *recompense* some evil which punishes it. Two problems are unsolved by this interpretation: first, what is the *recompense*? Hemorrhoids and STDs have been suggested, but these are not confined to homosexuals or Gentiles. Secondly, in every other use of *plane* by Paul, he uses it to mean a wrong belief rather than a desire or action. I (and many others) think a better understanding is that the *error* is idolatry and *recompense* is the uncleanness of Gentile culture. So the meaning is something like this: Because the Gentile forsook the true God to worship idols, God visited on them and their children a kind of uncleanness, namely the desire and practice of homosexual relations.
9. Paul concludes in Rom. 1.28-32 with a list of sins Paul thinks the Gentiles practice. There are no sexual sins on this list; all listed are sins of social disruption.
10. So Paul thinks of such acts as being unclean, dishonorable, improper, and "over against nature," but he does not apply the language of sin to them at all. Instead, he treats homosexual behavior as a dirty aspect of Gentile culture, visited on them as a *recompense* for the sin of idolatry.
11. This is the only passage in the Bible that refers to lesbian sexual relations.
12. Paul's main point here in Romans 1 is not homosexuality; he brings it up as a

illustration to the main line of his argument. Paul is offering a "global account of the universal fall of humanity." (Hays, 388) So homosexual activity will not incur God's punishment; to Paul, it is its own punishment, an "anti-reward."

13. Neither Paul nor anyone else in the antiquity had a concept of sexual orientation. Paul assumes all persons are born heterosexual and exchange those natural passions for those "over against nature." Strictly speaking, Paul is only talking about heterosexuals who commit homosexual acts. Yet this reading is anachronistic: Paul treats all homosexual activity as shameful, and this "exchange" may not be a matter of individual life decisions, but a characteristic of the fallen condition of the pagan world.
14. Paul's choice of homosexuality is probably not accidental: for him, refusal to worship the Creator leads to the flouting of the sexual distinctions that are in God's design.
15. Romans 1.18-32 is a sting operation. It whips the reader into a frenzy of indignation against others: those unbelievers, those idol-worshippers, those enemies of God. But in 2.1, the sting strikes: *Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge are doing the very same thing.* In Romans 2, Paul shows that all people--Jew and Gentile--stand equally condemned under the judgment of God. So for Paul the self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as shameful as the behavior itself. No one has secure platform to stand upon in order to pronounce condemnation on others.

D. Acts 10.1-48: The conversion of Cornelius (One of the most important texts in all of scripture!)

1. What does this imply about the holiness code in general?
2. I have seen the spirit of God present in gay persons; how can I hinder God?
3. The subversion of an earlier text by a later text.
4. Compare Moses vis-à-vis the prophets: henotheism vs. monotheism

III. Some possible conclusions. Which position is closest to yours?

A. The Bible opposes homosexuality

1. The Bible opposes homosexuality and is definitive for what the church should think and do about it.
2. The Bible opposes homosexuality, but it is just one sin among many. There is no justification for singling it out as more serious than other sins.
3. The Bible opposes homosexuality, but specific injunctions must be placed in the larger biblical context of creation, sin, judgment & grace.
4. The Bible opposes homosexuality, but is so time- and culture-bound that its

injunctions may and should be discarded if other considerations suggest better alternatives.

5. The Bible opposes homosexuality, but Christians have never followed the Jewish Holiness Code about any matter of sexual ethics: not about masturbation, nudity, prostitution, intercourse during menstruation, etc., so these exhortations do not bind Christians (Wink)

B. The Bible does not oppose homosexuality

6. The Bible does not oppose homosexuality because it does not speak of true or innate homosexuality, but rather of homosexual acts by people who are not homosexuals.

7. The Bible does not oppose homosexuality because the texts do not deal with homosexuality in general.

IV. Suggestions for straight Christians

- **Ask yourself:** How certain am I about homosexuality, its causes and ethics? Can I agree to disagree on this topic with some of my fellow church members?
- **Listen:** Straight people need to listen to gay Christians.

V. Suggestions for gay Christians

- **Join a church.** If the church is going to change its historic stance on homosexuality, it will be because of all of us. Maybe the Christian church has been too straight because gays need to be a part of the body of Christ.
- **Support a church with time, talents, money, and presence.** If inclusive churches are going to be healthy, it will take gays to be active too.

VI. Suggestions for all

- **Read:** William Sloan Coffin said, "We don't talk about homosexuality because we don't read about it."
- **Pray:** the spirit of God can speak to us about this issue, if we are open.
- **Speak** about the issue with family, friends, and church members, in bible studies, and share groups.

VII. Selected bibliography

A. Studies setting forth a basically traditional Christian perspective

Barnhouse, Ruth Tiffany. *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion*. NY: Seabury, 1979: Barnhouse is a psychiatrist and an Episcopal theologian, and teaches at SMU. This is an excellent book.

Dawn, Marva J. *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.: In a chapter on homosexuality, Dawn follows Richard Hays' criticisms of many authors. Still, it is a good one-chapter summary of this position in dialogue with others.

Geis, Sally B., and Donald E. Messer. *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994: The editors create a program for discussing and debating homosexuality. Excellent annotated bibliography at the end of each section.

Hays, Richard B. "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies." *Sojourners*, July 1991, 17-21. Hays states that, while "only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all of them express unqualified disapproval." See also his other works:

The Moral Vision of the New Testament. New York: Harper Collins, 1996: A complete treatment of the NT texts, with a fair acknowledgement of the problems they present in interpretation.

"Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1." *The Journal of Religion and Ethics*. 4, 1 (Spring 1986): 184-215.

Lovelace, Richard F. *Homosexuality and the Church: Crisis, Conflict, Compassion*. NJ: Revell, 1978: Lovelace, a professor at Gordon Conwell, was the leader of the (successful) minority report on the United Presbyterian (USA) task force on homosexuality. A good defense of the historic Christian stance; it is now dated but influential.

Mickey, Paul A. *Of Sacred Worth*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1991: Mickey, a professor of pastoral theology at Duke, argues that gays and lesbians are persons of sacred worth, but homosexual practices are incompatible with Christian faith.

Yamamoto, J. Isamu, ed. *The Crisis of Homosexuality*. Wheaton: Victor, 1990: Used by those who argue a traditional stance against homosexuality.

B. Studies calling for a new approach that recognizes homosexuality as a available Christian way of life.

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Chicago: University Press, 1980: Boswell, a professor of history at Yale, presents new data that exposes the hypocrisy of western Christianity. An exceptional book, winner of the 1981 American Book Award for History. Also see his book, *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*

Countryman, L. William. *Dirt, Greed, & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988: A noted NT scholar re-examines the evidence in the texts, and concludes that the passages in question have been misinterpreted.

Furnish, Victor Paul. *The Moral Teaching of Paul*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.

Furnish, a NT professor at SMU, agrees with Scroggs on the narrow limit of remarks made by Paul. Also see his article, "Homosexuality," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (SF: Harper &).

McNeil, John J. *The Church and the Homosexual*. Kansas City: S.A.M., 1976: As one of the first books to advocate an affirming position, this book (now dated) started a large brouhaha.

"Homosexuality: Challenging the Church to Grow." *After the Revolution: Sexual Ethics and the Church*. James B. Nelson, ed. Chicago: Christian Century, 1989. McNeil reflects on the changes in the church since his book, and hopes that Christians will grow churches by welcoming gay people.

Nelson, James B. *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978: This superior book has a great chapter on homosexuality that is thought-provoking and well-written.

Body Theology. Louisville: W/JKP, 1992. Contains a great sermon on homosexuality entitled, **I Thank God for You**.

Pim Pronk. *Against Nature?: Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993: Pronk, a dogmatics & philosophy professor at Hogeschool Holland, argues that, while the writers of scripture believe that homosexuality is a sin, it is not against the will of God.

Scroggs, Robin. *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983:

Scroggs, a professor at Union in NY, argues that NT passages do not address homosexuality as we now know it. A good survey of literature written before & after the NT.

Thatcher, Adrian & Elizabeth Stuart, eds. *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*. UK: Gracewing, 1996: A superb discussion of the key issues in sexuality by a variety of authors. There is no single perspective here.

C. Studies that are basically traditional, but that recognize the need to consider accommodation on a 'best possible' basis.

Batchelor, Edward, ed. *Homosexuality and Ethics*. NY: Pilgrim Press, 1980. A fine source book that offers brief statements from significant authors, such as Aquinas, Barth, Thielicke, and more than a dozen contemporary authors. A fair presentations of opinions.

Grenz, Stanley J. *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. A clear and fair presentation of the non-affirming position, says James Nelson. It's just out; I haven't read it yet.

Scanzoni, Letha, and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?: Another Christian View*. SF: Harper & Row, 1978.

Thielicke, Helmut. *Theological Ethics: Sex*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964. This famous theologian endorses the historic position of the church, and places it in creation and redemption. He calls for understanding for the homosexual for whom celibacy may seem not to be an option.