

# Biblical Self-Defense Course on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns

## Translations with a *Soft Touch*

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## Word Studies

### 1 Corinthians 6:9–10

<sup>9</sup> Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, <sup>10</sup> thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. [NRSV]

### 1 Timothy 1:9–10

<sup>9</sup> This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, <sup>10</sup> fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching <sup>11</sup> that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. [NRSV]

## Textual Notes

Boswell states, “There are three passages in the writings of Paul which have been supposed to deal with homosexual relations. Two words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and one in 1 Timothy 1:10 have been taken at least since the early twentieth century to indicate that “homosexuals” will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

“The first of the two, ‘malakos’ (basically, ‘soft’), is an extremely common Greek word; it occurs elsewhere in the New Testament with the meaning ‘sick’ and in patristic writings with senses as varied as ‘liquid,’ ‘cowardly,’ ‘refined,’ ‘weak

willed,’ ‘delicate,’ ‘gentle,’ and ‘debauched.’ In a specifically moral context it very frequently means ‘licentious,’ ‘loose,’ or ‘wanting in self-control.’ At a broad level, it might be translated as either ‘unrestrained’ or ‘wanton,’ but to assume that either of these concepts necessarily applies to gay people is wholly gratuitous. The word is never used in Greek to designate gay people as a group or even in reference to homosexual acts generically, and it often occurs in writings contemporary with the Pauline epistles in reference to heterosexual persons or activity.

“What is more to the point, the unanimous tradition of the church through the Reformation, and of Catholicism until well into the twentieth century, has been that this word applied to masturbation. This was the interpretation not only of native Greek speakers in the early Middle Ages but of the very theologians who most contributed to the stigmatization of homosexuality. No new textual data effected the twentieth-century change in translation of this word: only a shift in popular morality. Since few people any longer regard masturbation as the sort of activity which would preclude entrance to heaven, the condemnation has simply been transferred to a group still so widely despised that their exclusion does not trouble translators or theologians.

“The second word, ‘arsenokoitai,’ is quite rare, and its application to homosexuality in particular is more understandable. The best evidence, however, suggests very strongly that it did not connote homosexuality to Paul or his contemporaries but meant “male prostitute” until well into the fourth century, after which it became confused with a variety of words for disapproved sexual activity and was often equated with homosexuality.” [Boswell, pp. 106, 107.]

## References

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. Boswell cites the King James Version of scripture (KJV). Space prohibits the inclusion of his footnotes although they provide much explanation and many references.

Metzger, Bruce M. and Roland E. Murphy, editors. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. New Revised Standard Version. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991. [NOTE: Bruce Metzger served as consultant for section VI: "What Does the Bible Have to Say About Homosexuality," a portion of the PCUSA Minority Report on the Special Committee on Human Sexuality.]

### 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

### 1 Timothy 1:9-10

### Additional Interpretations

Countryman states, "Some have asserted that another passage in Paul's writings does, however, contain an unambiguous condemnation of homosexual persons as sinners. The passage in question is a list: "Neither those given to harlotry nor idolators nor adulterers nor malakoi nor arsenokoitai nor thieves nor the greedy (pleonektai) – not the drunken or the abusive or the rapacious will inherit God's reign" (1 Cor. 6:9-10). The interpretation of the two terms I have left untranslated here is the crux of the matter and has long proven troublesome. Malakoi means, basically, 'soft,' and the King James Version translated it 'effeminate.' Arsenokoitai is of uncertain meaning. It contains within it basic elements referring to the male and to sexual intercourse, and the King James translators, presumably relying on the guidance of etymology, used the peculiar phrase 'abusers of themselves with mankind.' The original edition of the Revised Standard Version combined the two terms and translated them 'homosexuals.' The second edition substituted 'sexual perverts.'

"The difficulty is that arsenokoitai never appears in a passage that would give us a clear sense of how the term was used or exactly what it meant either to Paul or to Paul's audience. There is no certain instance of it prior to the New Testament writings, and it occurs only one other time in the New Testament itself – again in a list and this time without malakoi (1 Tim. 1:10). While its etymology could very well suggest some such meaning as 'a man who has intercourse with another man,' etymology is a notoriously bad guide to the actual, live meanings of words. In English, for example, 'outbuilding' and 'outhouse' are synonymous in terms of etymology but quite different in usage. Usage is the real determinant of meaning.

“The next thing to be said in this regard is that the term ‘homosexual’ and the concept behind it are modern coinages. . . .

“There have been two major scholarly efforts [Scroggs and Boswell] to shed light on Paul’s terms in recent years. . . .

“It would be unwise to imagine that we can know clearly or definitively what the terms meant to Paul. The evidence is too meager to allow for much more than an educated guess. . . .

The result, it seems to me, is that the reference to arsenokoitai in 1 Corinthians is, regrettably, not helpful to us in the present connection. Whatever we are going to learn of Paul’s attitude toward homosexual behavior we must glean from the first chapter of Romans; and that, as we have seen, indicates that Paul regarded it as unclean but not therefore sinful” [pp. 117- 120].

The ELCA report states, “The list in 6:9-10 includes ten examples of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God: sexually immoral (porno), idolators, adulterers, malakoi, arsenokoitai, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers and robbers. The terms malakoi and arsenokoitai appear only here in Paul’s authentic letters (cf. 1 Tim. 1:9-10 for arsenokoitai) and have been regarded by translators and interpreters as relating to homosexual activity. Recent biblical scholarship has debated the meaning of these terms.

“The meanings of the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai in 1 Corinthians 6:9 are unclear. Neither term indisputably denotes ‘homosexual males’ in general. They are not conventional expressions for ‘homosexuals’ since there was no concept of, or generic term for ‘homosexuals’ or ‘homosexuality’ in antiquity. They only refer to specific acts engaged in by persons of the same sex. The terms in the lists cited in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere in the New Testament and secular world refer not to persons of a particular condition, i.e., the ‘condition’ of adultery, theft, greed, etc., but to persons engaging in specific violent, abusive, immoderate, socially destructive or religiously proscribed acts. Paul and his ancient contemporaries regarded the person and implied actions enumerated in the lists of 1 Corinthians 5

and 6 as agents capable of choosing between moral and immoral modes of behavior. Their actions, whether good or evil, were considered free and deliberate choices. Further, the list in which these terms appear is traditional in its form and content. In this list no particular stress is given to the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai. Nor is any reference made to such persons later in the letter. Rather, they, like the accompanying terms, refer in general to immoral and abusive modes of behavior considered by Jews and Christians as typical of idolatrous Gentiles. They are considered to be modes of porneia/ immorality in general and as types of behavior that are incompatible with the holiness of the community and its social and moral integrity” [pp. 23, 24].

The Minnesota UMC Conference curriculum gives this “alternate interpretation:” “Against this traditional view, it can be pointed out that the translation of the words in question (malakos and arsenokoitai) is far from certain, and that, significantly, early church theologians who condemned homosexuality never refer to these passages because they knew the words did not refer to homosexuality as such [Boswell, p. 107].

“The distinction between passive homosexual acts and active ones underlines the cultural view of that time. In New Testament times it was thought that to take the female, passive role was to take an inferior position and therefore wrong for a man.

[Scroggs] “suggests that these passages refer to pederasty – sexual relations between a mature man and a boy [pp. 101-109]. The words may well refer to the practice of male prostitution in pagan temples [Boswell, p. 107]” [Lesson 4, p. 5].

## References

[Countryman] Countryman, William L. *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*. Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1988. This offers an excellent investigation of Jewish and early Christian understandings about purity and sexual property, and their value for today’s world. Chapter 6, “Paul and Purity,” contains

the section on “Purity, Homosexual Acts, and Sin,” part of which is included here.

[Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Task Force on Human Sexuality. *Human Sexuality and the Christian Faith: A Study for the Church’s Reflection and Deliberation*. Minneapolis MN: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991. Portions of Chapter Two, “Human Sexuality in the Bible” are included here.

[Minnesota Conference] Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church Task Force to Study Ministries with and for Homosexual Persons. *Faithful Inquiry: Exploring Christian Responses to Homosexual Persons*. Minneapolis MN: Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1992. Exercise 8 of Lesson 4, “Scripture and its interpretation,” presents traditional and alternate interpretations of biblical passages most often used in discussions of homosexuality. Only the alternate interpretations are included here.

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