

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

“What does the Bible say about homosexuality and the Church?” An Uncontrollable Dialogue

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The Church tries to control the dialogue on scripture and homosexuality when it forces the conversation into a two-sided debate: It is commonly proposed that, on the one side, those who believe homosexuality is a sin do so *because* the Bible tells them so, while on the other side, those who believe homosexuality is a gift from God do so *in spite of* scripture, that is, they pick and choose what they believe.

A more uncontrollable dialogue, however, focuses on what the Bible says about homosexuality and the Church. This conversation is simultaneously one-sided and multi-sided. It is one-sided in that its sole foundation is a belief in the authority of scripture. It also has as many sides as the number of people who join in the dialogue: Every person in our Sunday School forums and parking lot discussions, academic gatherings and archaeology digs, translation committees and editorial boards, from our newest members (who must wonder what all the hoopla is about) to our earliest Biblical ancestors (who might wonder what we are all about given our tendency to deny and exploit God’s gift of sexuality).

What does the Bible say about homosexuality?
Not much, if anything.

What does the Bible say about the church? A lot!

First, what the Bible says about homosexuality. My collection of Bible tracts narrows down the references to homosexuality to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah [Genesis 19:1-11], the Holiness Code [Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13], and Paul’s letter to the Romans [chapter 1]. A search for the word “sodomite” in contexts implying sexual sins, yields

two Old Testament passages [Deuteronomy 23:17 and 1 Kings 14:24] and two New Testament passages [1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10].

From the earliest Hebrew tribes to the first Christian communities, the scriptures are peoples’ attempts to frame the essential questions in, for and about their lives. Who are we? Whose are we? What is our purpose? How are we to survive and live? Usually these tough questions get played out in stories, for example, the story of the destruction of Sodom. Even though this ancient city’s name Latinized serves as a umbrella for a variety of sexual relations – heterosexual, homosexual, and other-sexual, this story is not about homosexuality at all. Rather, this classic tale of good guys vs. bad guys (with women being caught in the middle) outlines the Middle Eastern code of hospitality necessary for survival in a harsh land. This code of hospitality is broken when the men of Sodom (the bad guys) demand of Lot’s guests (the good guys) “to know” them. The Hebrew verb “know” [*yada*] can be interpreted to mean “know who these strangers are, where they came from, and what they’re doing here!” Or it could mean “know them sexually, to gang rape them!” In the rich Hebrew tradition of double-meanings, it is probably both. Rarely do discussions of this story wrestle with the cultural context in which Lot offers his two daughters “who have not known [*yada*] a man” to the men of Sodom to try to appease them. Nor are modern English versions of the Bible critiqued for translating the same Hebrew verb “know” [*yada*], used in the context of the male guests and then in the context of the female daughters, with different moral weights.

The Leviticus Holiness Code reflects the ancient Israelites' need for religious, political and ethnic identity. At the center of their community, the Levites (priests) guided most of daily life and provided the core leadership for Israel. The prohibition against men lying with men was deemed critical for producing children and keeping relationships 'all in the family,' so to speak. Men were thought to contain a finite number of human seeds, and so male ejaculations were limited to only those days of the month when a man could impregnate a woman in a specific relationship. 'Spilling' or 'wasting' one's seed by any other action was prohibited. The prohibition could also be seen as regulating the conduct of men in battle: The victors should not rape the defeated. And it perhaps applied to temple cult prostitution as well.

The beginning of Paul's letter to the church in Rome is often hailed as the cornerstone of the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality, both because it is the only such passage that addresses women and because it is contained in the 'Christian' scriptures. A full treatment of Pauline theology including Paul's views on discipleship, marriage, and other relationships is not possible in this brief article. However, the following two points by historian John Boswell in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (The University of Chicago Press, 1980) help clarify the passage's meaning and context. First, the Greek phrase *para psusin* is incorrectly translated in many English versions as "unnatural" or "against nature" rather than "exceptional or different in nature." Thus Paul is not judging people who engage in "exceptional or different" intercourse as "unnatural" and therefore immoral as many Bibles would indicate. Rather, according to Boswell's second point, Paul is simply using this passage as "a mundane analogy" to discuss the larger issue of monotheism and polytheism. To carry out the analogy, polytheism (belief in many gods) is indeed different from monotheism (belief in one God) but certainly not the same as unbelief or atheism (disbelief).

While taking into account the contexts of peoples in the Bible, students of the word "sodomite" (implying sexual sins) must also consider the biases of translators and interpreters of the Bible.

Definitions of "sodomite" in the history of the English language are vague and complex, according to Boswell, and they include opposite-gender as well as same-gender relations. This King James English word was inserted into scripture in 1611 to replace a Hebrew word *qadesh* meaning "holy" and inferring "cult prostitute" when understood in the context of the fertility cults of ancient Israel and its neighbors. Biblical scholar Phyllis Bird in "*To Play the Harlot*": *An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor*" (Chapter 6 of *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* edited by Peggy L. Day, Fortress Press, 1989) uses archaeological evidence to suggest the original meaning of *qadesh* was "sacred/consecrated women." She maintains that ancient recorders of the Hebrew canon, out of their own prejudices, misassociated the sacred women with prostitutes. In the New Testament, "sodomite" replaced a Greek word *arsenokoitai* better translated "male prostitute." It appears next to the word *malakos* that traditionally means "masturbation." One popular English paraphrase of scripture replaces these two words with the late 19th century term "homosexual." In both the Old and New Testaments, several modern English versions substitute "sodomite" with "homosexual." All of these instances would indicate that the scriptures do not address homosexuality, per se, much less condemn it. Rather, malversions of the Bible serve to indict all who are responsible for abusing the gospel truth.

In light of this, what essential questions do these passages pose for us in the Church today?

- Perhaps the moral of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is *We don't need to beg*. If Lot had stayed inside with his guests and family and let go of what was pressing on the outside that threatened havoc in their lives, he might not have had to sink so low as to offer up as sacrifices his only children. When have we tried to bargain with forces that would violate our spiritual and sexual well-being? How are we held hostage by our insecurities as well as our securities in things other than God's saving power?
- In what ways do we practice hospitality in our harsh, forbidding lands? How might we welcome the stranger in our own families? Or celebrate what makes us family among strangers?

- For the ancient Israelites, the Holiness Code helped maintain religious, political and ethnic purity, virtues deemed necessary for their survival as people of God. For us Presbyterians, “the peace, purity, unity, and progress of the Church under the will of Christ” is considered necessary for our survival as people of God [*Book of Order* G-9.0102b]. How do we champion these virtues amid harmful, imperfect, fractured and worsening conditions? Under what circumstances do we decide that “the Church is called to undertake [its] mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life” [*B.O.* G-3.0400]?

- The Israelites were unique for believing in just one God. How do we profess belief in just one God when we have differing relationships with God?

- The Israelites also believed in a God who was not tied to the land but rather was present with them in slavery, in the promised land, and in exile. Do we dare believe in a God who is not tied to one class, or gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or age, or faith?

- Paul and other early believers dealt with the question, Do Gentiles first have to become Jews in order then to become Christians? For us believers today, Do homosexuals have to become heterosexuals in order to become Christians?

- Given the very human history of biblical recording, translation and interpretation, how do we maintain belief in the authority of scripture? Are we able to respond faithfully to the critical questions, concerns and possibilities raised in this century for the first time ever by poor people, people of color, gay people, women, people whose parents could not read or did not possess a Bible? How might we live as though we are saved not by correct belief or some law of reason but by God’s grace?

Scripture was not formed in a vacuum, nor is it formative for anyone who tries to study it in a vacuum. To truly *understand* God’s Word and Wisdom, we must confess we *stand under* God’s loving authority with all our fears, discomforts, and conflicts raised by any wholesome wrestling with scripture. Fear is not rational and therefore does not respond to reason. This does not mean we cannot employ psychology, sociology, history and other disciplines to help name and face our fears be they personal, culturally-embedded, or inherited

over the years. Rather, in this uncontrollable dialogue, it is vital for us not to be overpowered by the Bible’s complexities and variances but to be empowered by God who loves us through our fear.

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