

Homosexuality & Scripture



The Bible

In our Judeo-Christian society, the documents known as the Bible serve as the primary guide on most issues. It is interesting that many Christians take literally the references to homosexual acts while interpreting other text with great flexibility. One person reported listening to a nationally known woman speak in her campaign against homosexuality. She spent much time quoting impressively from Leviticus. The listener accepted much of what the speaker had said until realizing that by Levitical standards, the crusader had herself broken many biblical laws: women speaking in church, women teaching men, wearing a dress made of cotton and polyester, and probably others of which he was unaware.

So what does the Bible really say about homosexuality? Actually, very little. Jesus said nothing at all, which is most significant. Considering the relatively small amount of attention the Bible gives to the subject, we must ask ourselves why this is such a volatile issue while other subjects (e.g. judgment, pride, hypocrisy) about which the scriptures say a great deal, receive much less passionate attention. Before looking at specific passages, let us note that everyone understands the scriptures on and through the light of what they have been taught. The Bible was not written in a cultural void, and many of its instructions and laws we simply classify as less relevant today (e.g. prohibition of eating pork).

Nowhere in the Bible is the idea of persons being homosexual addressed. The statements are, without exception, directed to certain homosexual acts. Early writers had no understanding of homosexuality as a psycho-sexual orientation. That truth is a relatively recent discovery. The biblical authors were referring to homosexual acts performed by persons they assumed were heterosexuals.

The Sodom Story

A chief text for condemnation of homosexuality has been the Sodom story. This story has often been interpreted as showing God's abhorrence of homosexuality. In the story, two angels in the form of men were sent to Sodom to the home of Lot. While they were there, all the men of the city, "both young and old, surrounded the house — everyone without exception," and demanded that the visitors be brought out, so that we might know them" (verse 5). Lot begged the men to leave his guests alone and take his daughters instead. The men of the city became angry and stormed the door. As a result, they were all struck blind by the angels.

There are several problems with the traditional interpretation of this passage. Whether or not the intent of the men of Sodom was sexual, the inhospitality and injustice coming from the mob and generally characterizing the community were “the sin of Sodom”. Jesus himself refers to the inhospitality of Sodom. If, indeed, the men were homosexuals, then why would Lot offer them his daughters? What is threatened here is rape. The significant point then is that all rape is considered horrible by God. The story deserves another reading by all of us.

It should be noted that all of the men of Sodom could not have been homosexual or there would have been no need to destroy them since they would have all died off with no heirs. Quite likely they were a mixed group of evil men attempting to be abusive to people who were different. Ironically, lesbian and gay people are often the victim of that sin.

Although the traditional interpretation of the Sodom story fails as an argument against homosexuality, there are several other Old Testament passages which do condemn homosexual acts. Again, it should be noted that these passages do not deal with same-sex orientation, nor is there any references to genital love between lesbian or gay persons.

Homosexual Acts

Of thousands of Old Testament passages, only two make explicit reference to homosexual acts: Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13. Both of these passages are a part of the Levitical holiness code which is not kept by any Christian group. If it were enforced, almost every Christian would be excommunicated or executed. It has been logically argued that science and progress have made many of the Levitical laws irrelevant for us. For example, Tim LaHaye states that, although Levitical laws prohibit intercourse during menstruation, medical authorities do not view it as harmful; and, therefore, it should not be viewed as sinful. He further explains, “those laws were given 3,500 years ago before showers and baths were convenient, before tampons, disinfectants, and other improved means of sanitation had been invented”. With that, LaHaye makes this law irrelevant and rightly so. Ironically, though, in his book, *The Unhappy Gay*, the Levitical laws are one of the chief cornerstones. Much of the holiness code is now irrelevant for us as moral law. Thus, having children which was of exceptional importance to the early Hebrews is now made less relevant by overpopulation, just as the prohibition against eating pork and shell-fish has been made irrelevant by refrigeration.

The Bible never addresses the issue of homosexual love, but has several examples of same-sex love. David’s love for Jonathan was said to exceed his love for women. Ruth’s relationship with Naomi is certainly an example of a deep, bonding love. The Bible does value love between persons of the same sex.

Jesus' Attitude

In the context of the New Testament there is no record of Jesus saying anything about homosexuality. This ought to strike us as very odd in light of the great threat to Christianity, family life, and the American way that some would have us believe homosexuality is. Jesus saw injustice and religious hypocrisy as a far greater threat to the Realm of God.

Episcopal priest, Dr. Tom Horner has written that the Gospels imply in two places that Jesus' attitude toward lesbians and gays would not have been hostile. The first is found in the story of Jesus healing the Centurion's servant. The word used for the servant is "*pais*" which in the Greek culture referred to a younger lover of an older more powerful or educated man. Clearly the story demonstrates an unusually intense love, and Jesus' response was wholly positive.

The other hint of Jesus' attitude is seen in his comments about eunuchs. Jesus opposed divorce in opposition to the abuses experienced by women. It is in the context of marriage which Jesus said that "some eunuchs were born so; others had been made eunuchs and still others choose to be eunuchs for the Kingdom's sake."

Jesus' remarks about celibacy and castration are clear, but a male child being born without testicles is a rare birth defect. It is only in our day that the Kinsey Institute has demonstrated that sexual orientation is likely determined prior to birth. It could well be that those to whom Jesus refers as being "born eunuchs" are the people we call lesbian or gay.

Jesus' attitude toward eunuchs differed greatly from the fundamentalist Pharisees of his day. To them, eunuchs were excluded from the covenant and barred from worship and participating in the community of faith. Jesus' graceful approach to eunuchs is beautifully pictured in the promise of the prophecy of Isaiah 56:4-8, "To the eunuchs...I will give them an everlasting name that will not be taken away."

In Jesus' day there were three types of persons called eunuchs: celibates, those who were slaves and were castrated so that children would not be born to them, and those who were "born eunuchs" or homosexuals. Royal and wealthy households would use castrated slaves to work with and guard the concubines and women slaves. However when assigning slaves to female members of the royal family they would choose homosexual slaves. With female members, the concern was not just unwanted pregnancies, but also rape.

It is against this background that we must read the story found in Acts 8:26-40. In this passage the Holy Spirit sends Philip the Deacon to witness to and baptize an Ethiopian eunuch of Queen Candace of Ethiopia. One of the earliest converts to Christianity was a person excluded for sexual reasons from the Old Testament community.

Paul's References

Paul's statement in Romans 1:18-32 has been taken as the strongest New Testament rejection of homosexuality. He is concerned about the influence of the pagan culture on the Roman Christians. After giving a detailed description of a world that "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator," he continues, "Therefore, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lusts for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty of their perversion."

What Paul was referring to was homosexual temple prostitution which was performed by various cults (though far more cults used heterosexual prostitution). Again, Paul is not referring to same-sex love, and he clearly has no concept of persons for whom this lifestyle is "natural."

Paul's other reference to homosexual acts is similar to that of 1 Timothy 1:8-11. Both passages contain lists of persons to be excluded from the Realm of God. The interpretation of these passages depends on two Greek words which have always presented a problem for translators. In the King James Version, they are translated "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind." In the Revised Standard Version, they were combined and rendered homosexuals; however, these are not the Greek words for homosexual, so that translations reflect the scholars' bias. The New International Version illustrates the difference in these two words by translating them "male prostitute" and "homosexual offenders". The Jerusalem Bible uses the terms "catamites and sodomites". Catamites were youth kept especially for sexual purpose; they were usually paid large sums of money. Neither passage refers to persons of same-sex orientation, but to people who used their sexuality for personal gain.

The Love of Christ

Jesus did a great deal to change many social customs and ideas. He elevated the position of women, and they were ultimately his best and most faithful disciples. He did this by example and by commandments which were absolutely inclusive of the rights of all people. Yet, in the name of the Christ whose love encompassed all, the Church has been the most homophobic of all institutions. This should not be surprising when we realize that the Church is still the largest institution which is primarily racially segregated.

The final and central message of the New Testament is that ALL persons are loved by God so much that God's Son was sent as a means of redemption from a disease by which we are all afflicted. The cure for this disease cannot be found in any set of actions. Neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality is redemptive. God's love through Christ was given to all people.

The Theological Reflection

For the Christian, sin must be understood as a disease which results FROM a broken relationship with God and which results IN a broken relationship with one another and with ourselves. Hence, Jesus' supreme command is to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Christianity is not a religion with new rules and laws, but is rather a new relationship with God. Those things which the legalists are fond of labeling "sins" are actually just symptoms of the much deeper disease of alienation and estrangement. Much of the energy of the Church has been spent dealing with symptoms while leaving the disease intact. Jesus did not seem overly concerned about the legal transgressions of those to whom he ministered. Rather, he was much more concerned with healing the physical, spiritual, emotional, or relational brokenness of people. Perhaps if the Church would again give itself to the healing/reconciling ministry of Jesus, then some of the symptoms about which we are so concerned would begin to disappear.

That brings us to the question: Is homosexuality a symptom of brokenness? In some few cases perhaps so. Yet, obviously pointing fingers of blame and accusation is not Christ's way. Rather, Jesus accepted people as they were and allowed love and acceptance to work its miracle. However, most lesbians and gays have been lesbian or gay for as long as they can remember. For them, it is as much a natural characteristic as their eye color or their handedness. Kinsey Institute research has suggested that homosexuality may well be genetic or at least linked to some prenatal factors. Certainly most competent psychologists would concur that sexual orientation is set prior to the age of five in most persons. It is, therefore, not a matter of choice, so it cannot be a moral or ethical issue.

Many Christians insist that God can change/cure the homosexual. In the book, *The Third Sex*, there are six reported cases of homosexuals whom God has "cured". Of these six, at least four are known to have returned to their gay life style. Many lesbians and gays spend most of their lives trying, with no success, to persuade God to change them. It is like trying to get God to change your eye color. What option then is left to these persons? They have been told that they can't be gay and be Christians; and since all efforts have failed in their struggle not to be gay or lesbian, then their only recourse, according to the Church, is that they can't be Christian. So the Church has discounted or discarded as much as 10% of the population.

If they are excluded from the life of the Christian community, who then will tell them of God's inclusive love and of Jesus' reconciling death? Are they left to assume that God is so narrow-minded as to exclude them for something over which they have no control and for a choice they did not make? When will the Church finally be brave enough to say with Paul, "in Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female," gay or straight. God has enough love for all!