
*The Bible and Homosexuality*¹

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Index

<i>Part 1: What the Bible Says</i>	<i>page 2</i>
<i>The Biblical View of Sexuality</i>	<i>page 2</i>
<i>Old Testament Passages</i>	<i>page 3</i>
<i>New Testament Passages</i>	<i>page 5</i>
<i>Part 2: What the Bible Means</i>	<i>page 9</i>
1. <i>We have changed our minds on what the Bible says before, why not on this issue?</i>	<i>page 9</i>
2. <i>What about Biblical prohibitions we no longer take notice of – isn't homosexuality like those?</i>	<i>page 10</i>
3. <i>The Bible condemns only certain forms of homosexuality</i>	<i>page 11</i>
4. <i>Homosexuality has a genetic component that the writers of the Bible did not realize</i>	<i>page 12</i>
5. <i>We should be loving and accepting of all people regardless of sexual preference</i>	<i>page 13</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>page 13</i>
<i>Further Reading</i>	<i>page 14</i>

Introduction

Many people know and accept that the orthodox Christian position is against homosexual practice, however some are not exactly sure why. This is not surprising as there are many voices offering “alternative” views on what the Bible says and we need to have a clear picture that is consistent throughout the whole of Scripture. This booklet is an attempt to address that need for clarity.

In Part 1, I look at the Biblical witness itself to see what the text says and in Part 2, I look at the arguments people have raised to discount the biblical evidence. I want to acknowledge a great debt to

¹ The material here was originally given in two sermons preached at St. Aidan's Anglican Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, on March 6 and 13, 2005.

Robert Gagnon's exhaustive book on the subject, "The Bible and Homosexual Practice"² from which much of my material has been gleaned.

Before going any further, I must again affirm that in speaking against homosexual practice, as I believe the Bible does, we are not isolating it as the sin God is more concerned about than any other. Gossip, for example, is part of Paul's catalogue of "every kind of wickedness" listed alongside homosexual practice in Romans 1 (verse 29). It is not that we should "come down hard" only on sexual sin and "go easy" on other kinds of sin; it is just that no one is arguing for gossip as a good thing, but many are doing just that for homosexual unions. This issue is a focal point, the tip of the iceberg, of the far deeper issues of authority and cultural accommodation that are facing the Church in our generation. This is why we must address it.

I also want to affirm that persons who find themselves sexually attracted to the same gender or who are involved in homosexual practice are deeply loved by God – Jesus was criticized for being compassionate to the sexually broken (e.g. Luke 7:36-50). However, his love for them also meant that he called them away from their sinful practices (e.g. John 8:11). There are many who can attest to the power of God for help in their sexual struggles. However the foundation upon which to base all our struggles against temptation – sexual and otherwise – is the Scriptures.

Part 1: What the Bible Says³

The Biblical View of Sexuality

We begin, not by looking at Bible passages related to homosexuality but at those which give the Bible's view on sexuality in general. If you ask someone what a forest looks like and they go up to a tree and examine a twig, they could say, "A forest consists of thin stems, horizontal to the ground." You would come away with a misunderstanding of trees and forests because you chose to examine an aspect in isolation. It is exactly the same with regards to homosexuality. Until you are able to stand back and see the overall Biblical perspective on God's gift of sexuality, you will not be able to place individual elements or passages in the right context.

Therefore we begin at the beginning – Genesis 1 and 2. Here we are given two different perspectives of creation, probably stemming from different sources, but carefully arranged side by side under the inspiration of God. Genesis 1 looks at creation at the cosmic level, Genesis 2 at the human level. Both speak about sexuality and its purposes. In Genesis 1:27-28, it says,

God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

Here, we see that humanity's separate genders are a reflection of God's image. Animals share this differentiation, but human sexuality appears here to be connected with or flow from, their special status of being made in God's image. This implies that the union of the two genders gives the fuller reflection of God's image. That is not saying that an individual man or woman is of any less value, but that when masculinity and femininity come together in marriage or community, together they reflect the "fullness" of God more completely.

This is affirmed in the next chapter when a human as an individual is alone and it is not good:

² Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice; Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

³ Lessons read in connection with this section were: Genesis 1:26-28; Romans 1:18-32; Matthew 19:1-8.

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air...But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man.” For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:18-24).

It is not another being of like gender that God creates as a partner, but one which complements the other – both anatomically and emotionally. Here, the emphasis is not on procreation, as in chapter 1 (this is only mentioned later in the same story in 3:16), but on “the relational (including physical/sexual) complementarity of male and female, that is, on the companionship and support provided by heterosexual marriage.”⁴

In this passage, “‘Adam,’ the human creation from the ground (‘adama’) is literally dismembered. His side is split open in order to provide for him the companionship of a complementary being. Marriage between a man and a woman reunites these representatives of the two genders into ‘one flesh’ and is not simply the union of two individuals. The missing part of man is found in woman and vice-versa.”⁵ The sexual union of man and woman in marriage, of two complementary beings, makes possible a single, composite human being restoring humanity's original wholeness. This union is so crucial that “the marital bond between man and woman takes precedence even over the bond with the parents that physically produced them.”⁶ “Sexual intercourse or marriage between members of the same sex does not restore the disunion because it does not reconnect complementary beings.”⁷

As the Bible unfolds, not a single hero of the faith engages in homosexual conduct;⁸ every regulation affirming the sexual bond is that of a man and a woman without exception; all Old Testament laws and proverbs and New Testament passages regulating and establishing proper boundaries for relationships are for heterosexual ones, none for homosexual. To this we add the heterosexual imagery in both Testaments of our relationship to God: God and Israel as wife; Christ and the Church as bride.⁹

This complementariness of male and female, emotionally, anatomically, sexually, and procreatively, is the setting for sexuality throughout the Bible, and is the background for the critiques of same-sex intercourse as contrary to nature that we find in both Testaments and Jewish thought.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid., pg. 61.

⁵ Ibid., pg. 194.

⁶ Ibid., pg. 61.

⁷ Ibid., pg. 194.

⁸ Some have seen homosexual overtones in the relationship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18:1-4; however, the actions described can be readily understood in light of the political conventions of the day, not the sexual. No words with sexual overtones (e.g. “lie” or “know”) are used and David's unmistakable heterosexual activities (and sin) are clearly spoken of in the rest of Scripture. See Gagnon, *ibid.*, pgs. 146-154.

⁹ E.g. Isaiah 62:5, Revelation 21:2. Further affirmation of the universal biblical negation of homosexual practice is seen in the fact that it is found in all the literary strands people have detected in the first six books of the Bible: J, P, and the Holiness Code, along with the Deuteronomic prohibitions against cult prostitution and cross dressing (Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 22:5).

¹⁰ Gagnon sees direct or indirect references to homosexual practice in the following texts: Texts: Genesis 9:20-27; 19:4-11; Judges 19:22-25; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Ezekiel. 16:50 (possibly too 18:12 and 33:26); Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; probably also Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:7. To these can be added references to

Old Testament Passages

In the Old Testament, we will look at two key groups of texts, from Genesis and Leviticus.

1. Genesis 19:4-11 – Sodom and Gomorrah: One of the most infamous references to homosexuality is in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 and 19. Two of three angels who have just visited Abraham and Sarah with the promise of the birth of Isaac arrive in the wicked city of Sodom to warn Abraham’s nephew Lot to flee the impending disaster. The men of the city gather around Lot’s door demanding him to give up his guests so they can gang-rape them (verses 4-5). Lot protests, even offering his daughters as a substitute (!), saying that what they want to do is wicked (verse 7) and against the laws of hospitality – “But don’t do anything to these men for they have come under the protection of my roof” (verse 8).

In the past, although this story has been seen primarily as one of sexual perversion (thus the word “sodomy”, which means unnatural sexual intercourse), many contemporary authors point out that we are not talking about loving homosexual relationships but gang rape and most of all, a breach of hospitality.¹¹ Here it must be acknowledged that the major sin of Sodom as seen in other Old Testament texts¹² is inhospitability and social injustice. Therefore, it is unwise to base opposition to homosexual practice primarily on stories such as this one. However, Sodom’s real sin of pride and haughtiness as stressed by Ezekiel, (Ezekiel 16:49-50) does imply a flagrant disregard of God’s priorities which include his purposes in creation for sexuality. The key passages of Genesis (1-3), Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13), and Romans 1 (26-27) all suggest that same-sex intercourse was rejected on the grounds that it violated God’s design – only males and females compliment each other anatomically and procreatively. When we abandon God’s design for sexuality in favour of our own, that is an example of pride.¹³

2. Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 – The Holiness Code:

We now turn to the main passages in the Old Testament prohibiting same-sex intercourse which are found in two chapters in Leviticus dealing primarily with unlawful sexual relations. They form part of the section of the book known as “The Holiness Code” (chapters 17-26). The verses dealing with homosexuality state:

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable...If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13)

“Lying with a man as with a woman” is the best indication we have that the primary concern was a man behaving as if he were a woman - the object of male sexual desires. It is called “detestable” or an “abomination.” This word is restricted in Leviticus to sexual acts which are regarded by God as utterly abhorrent, carried with them the death penalty, and endangered the whole nation’s blessing by God. It is used in these chapters as a summary of all prohibited sexual relationships and specifically of homosexual activity. In chapter 18, all the other forms of activity prohibited here such as incest (6-18), adultery (20), child sacrifice (21) and bestiality (23) are still universally viewed as abhorrent. The only exception is having sexual intercourse with a woman “in her menstrual uncleanness” (19).¹⁴

Why is homosexual activity viewed as specifically “detestable”? Because it transgresses the gender boundaries set at creation which go beyond any cultural considerations. First, it entails a confusion of

homosexual cult prostitution: Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:14; Revelation 21:8; 22:15. Ibid., pg. 432.

¹¹ E.g. D. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1955; reprint, Hamden, CT: Shoestring Press, 1975)

¹² Isaiah 1:10 ff., Jeremiah 23:14, Ezekiel 16:49ff.

¹³ See Gagnon, *ibid.*, pg. 86.

¹⁴ See page 9, n. 32.

genders through violation of the anatomical and procreative complementarity of male and female. A male penis and a female vagina are made for one another. Secondly it rejects the pattern laid down in Genesis 1-3 for gender complementarity between male and female, as we saw in the (Genesis) depiction of woman's creation out of man's "rib" (or side.)"¹⁵ Thirdly, it serves to destabilize the integrity of the family and the ordered survival of the species. This is why the penalty for this and some other sexually-prohibited activities is extreme: death (20:13) – (although we must remember that Jesus did away with the death penalty as seen in the case of the woman caught in adultery - but that did not mean he approved of adultery!).

Therefore, these prohibitions are still in force today and not just for those under the Law of Moses. We will see that Jesus implicitly and Paul explicitly endorsed these prohibitions against homosexual intercourse as we now turn to the New Testament passages dealing with sexuality and same-sex unions.

New Testament Passages

First we look at the words and attitudes of Jesus and then those of Paul.

1. Views of Jesus:

What were Jesus' views on sexuality and homosexuality in particular? Did he say anything specifically about homosexuality? No he did not. Does Jesus' silence indicate tacit approval? Not at all! He also doesn't mention bestiality and incest, two other "abominations" in the Holiness Code, and no one assumes he was in favour of those.

When Jesus does speak about sexuality, it is always in the context of an exclusively heterosexual model of monogamous marriage. In his discussion of divorce in Matthew 19:1-8 he hearkens back to both passages we looked at from Genesis 1 and 2. He didn't overturn any of the prohibitions against immoral sexual behaviour in Leviticus or anywhere else in the Mosaic law – in fact, he took a stricter view than the official interpretation of the law as we can see in the repeated phrase used in the Sermon on the Mount "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..." (Matthew 5:27, etc.). Plus, far from being less rigorous on sexual issues than the surrounding culture, he was more! In terms of marital faithfulness, he called people to a higher standard than that practiced in his society - easy divorce. The fact that Jesus took sexual sin very seriously is shown by his saying that lust after a woman is adultery in your heart and following it up with admonitions to cast away offending bodily members, eye or hand - i.e. sight or touch. (Matthew 5:27-32).

Given all this and the universal opposition to homosexual practice in the Jewish culture of his day¹⁶ it is unlikely Jesus would have held some sort of secret acceptance of homosexuality. In fact, when Jesus said "for it is from...the human heart that evil intentions come: sexual immoralities (*porneiai*)...adulteries...licentiousness...all these things come from within and defile a person" (Mark 7:21-23) he would have included same-sex intercourse as immorality. Gagnon attests: "No first century Jew could have spoken of *porneiai* (plural) without having in mind the list of forbidden sexual offences in Leviticus 18 and 20 (incest, adultery, same-sex intercourse, bestiality)."¹⁷

Why didn't Jesus speak specifically about homosexuality? He probably didn't encounter any openly gay people, and therefore didn't have opportunity to call them to repentance. However, he did act with

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 139.

¹⁶ See Gagnon, pgs. 159-183 for details.

¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 191.

compassion on the morally fallen - visiting their homes, mixing with them, communicating the good news and inviting them to repent and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

2. Paul: Romans 1:24-27

We now move on to Paul and the most explicit passage on the issue in the New Testament (and whole Bible), from Romans 1. Not only is it very clear, it also includes lesbianism, which is not specifically dealt with elsewhere. In addition, it is from a writer for whom we have a large body of writings and so we can set his comments in a wider context.

Paul begins his review of human depravity with our initial rebellion against God:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Romans 1:21-23)

Our rebellion resulted in an exchange of the true God for false gods, idols of our own making, which we can control, or are more to our liking. Exchanging the glory of the Creator for idolatrous images of the created order is foolish and against nature so you end up by living out your world-view; our lives become a perversion of what is right and true. When we suppress the truth about God (verses 18-20) and our relationship to him (vertical), which is the natural order of things, we end up by developing unnaturally in our relationships with others (horizontal):

Because of this, 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 lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. (Romans 1:26-27)

I had always wondered by Paul jumps from idolatry to sexual perversion in this passage, so I found helpful the following analysis given through Leanne Payne's Pastoral Care Ministries Seminar: when you put away the Creator you are left with creation; at the centre of creation is *procreation*; thus it is this focus which becomes most distorted when God is not given his true glory, his rightful place at the centre of our lives. This is why Paul goes from idolatry directly to sexual perversion. This is why nature religions such as the Baal and Ashteroth worship of the Canaanites centred on fertility rites and cult prostitution. Gagnon concludes, "An absurd exchange of God for idols leads us to an absurd exchange of heterosexual intercourse for homosexual intercourse. A dishonouring of God leads to a mutual dishonouring of selves."¹⁸ This is the natural consequence of our folly - the "giving up" by God (verses 24, 26); in a sense, God "steps back" and lets our natural inclinations take their toll, allowing our sinful passions to take us over - to warn us and alert us to the ultimate end of our actions in order that we might repent and avert the dreadful eternal fate that awaits us because we have exchanged the truth about God for a lie.

In this passage, Paul's phrase "unnatural"/"contrary to nature" (verses 26-27) refers, like his contemporary Jewish commentators and Leviticus, to the anatomical and procreative complementarity of male and female. It is something which is "plain to them" (*phaneron*) (verse 19). The language of this passage underlines this as it reflects that of the creation account in Genesis 1; e.g. "ever since the creation of the world," (verse 20); "the Creator," (verse 25). (In verses 26-27, Paul's use of the Greek words for "males and females" rather than "men and women" echoes the exact words in the Greek version (LXX) of Genesis 1:27 "male and female he made them."¹⁹ Thus Paul has the Genesis account of the creation of

¹⁸ Gagnon, pg. 253.

¹⁹ See Gagnon, pg. 290f. for evidence of the strong intertextual connection between Romans 1:23 and the wording (LXX) of Gen 1:26.

male and female humans in view. Homosexual activity is against God's design. This "nature argument" is simple yet convincing. "Same-sex activity denies clear anatomical gender differences and functions."²⁰

3. Paul: 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10

Finally, there are two more passages in Paul that refer to homosexual activity that are found in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor *male prostitutes* nor *homosexual offenders* nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and *perverts*, for slave traders and liars and perjurers...(1 Timothy 1:9-10)

The translations "male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, and pervers" represent two key words found in both passages: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. The former means the passive partner in homosexual union; the latter the active partner. Recent attempts have been made to define the former solely in terms of "effeminate call boys" or the latter as those who exploit others homosexually to show that these terms can not be applied as prohibitions against loving, committed same-sex relationships today.

However, attempts at restricting the definitions of these words to mean just prostitution or pederasty rather than homosexual behaviour in general do what liberals often accuse conservatives of doing - proof-texting. These attempts at narrow definitions fail when set in the wider context of the Scriptures we have examined²¹ and the usage of the words in other Jewish writings of the period.²² For example, it can be shown that *arsenokoites*, a word coined by Greek-speaking Jews, was from a conflation of two words from the Greek version of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: *arsen* (male) and *koites* (bed/lying).²³ Gagnon concludes: "It is self-evident, then, that the combination of terms, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, are correctly understood in our contemporary context when they are applied to every conceivable type of same-sex intercourse."²⁴ Thus, Paul consistently affirms all same-gender sexual activity as contrary to God's design for us.

In 1 Corinthians 6:11, after Paul lists all those who will not inherit the kingdom of God – which include a whole lot of categories, not just homosexual offenders - he continues:

And that is what some of you *were*. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

All of us are called to account before God for our sexual conduct not because God hates us but because God loves us and wants the best for us. Sexuality is part of his design for us and when we transgress the boundaries he has set before us, it is to our detriment – both as individuals and as a society. He wants to lead us into wholeness and the fullness of salvation he has won for us in Christ.

In Christ there is hope for all of us.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 264.

²¹ Genesis 1-2, Romans 1, Leviticus 18, 20

²² E.g. Philo and Josephus.

²³ See Gagnon, *ibid.*, pages 306-336.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 330

Part 2: What the Bible Means²⁵

Given that the clear teaching of the Bible appears to set same-sex unions in a negative light, many say however, that we can now interpret the Bible differently given new ways of looking at sexuality and Biblical interpretation. What follows addresses whether we have read the Bible correctly. In its discussion on same-sex activity, what does the Bible mean?

1. We have changed our minds on what the Bible says before, why not on this issue?

“Oh,” people in favour of same-sex unions say, “What about remarriage after divorce, women’s ordination and slavery. Didn’t we change our positions on what the Bible said? Can’t we now do the same over the blessing of monogamous same-sex unions?” These issues are all fundamentally different from the current one: regarding divorce, it is allowed in Scripture under certain conditions; regarding the ordination of women, the Lambeth Conference of 1978 overwhelmingly accepted that it was permissible and can be shown to be congruent with Scriptural principles and practice; regarding slavery, provisions in both the Old and New Testaments suggest a trajectory of opposition to slavery and nowhere in the New Testament is it affirmed as an institution.

In all these areas, we can see what William Webb has called “Redemptive Movement.”²⁶ He points out that when you compare the Bible to its contemporary society in its treatment of women and slaves, there is a distinct move forward. The provisions regarding women and slaves in the Old Testament are a marked improvement on those of surrounding cultures. For example, Hebrew slavery is more a system of “indentured service” with liberation every seventh year. However, foreign slaves are still permitted although there are provisions for their care. In the New Testament there is a marked step forward – the abolition of slavery is not espoused, but the ground work is firmly laid in the ministry of Jesus and writings of Paul. Examples of this are Paul’s treatment of the runaway slave Onesimus in the book of Philemon and his statements such as, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Thus the foundation is laid for the later abolition of slavery. There is “Redemptive Movement” and Biblical sanction for positive change.

However, in the case of homosexuality, the situation is quite different. In the surrounding cultures, there was acceptance or at least toleration of some form of homosexual intercourse²⁷ whereas the position of the Old Testament is categorically against it²⁸ and this is not changed in the New.²⁹ Unlike slavery and the place of women, there is no “redemptive movement” for approval of homosexual practice in the Bible.

²⁵ Lessons read in connection with this section were: Genesis 2:18-24, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; John 8:2-11

²⁶ William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

²⁷ “The Middle Assyrian Laws do not criminalize consensual homosexual intercourse, and some forms of ancient Near Eastern texts suggest acceptance of or at least tolerance of some forms of homosexual intercourse (such as sex with social inferiors, foreigners, or homosexual cult prostitutes).” Gagnon, *ibid.*, n. 219, pg. 139.

²⁸ “The level at which the Levitical laws stigmatize and criminalize all homosexual Intercourse, while not discontinuous with some trends elsewhere, goes far beyond anything else currently known in the ancient Near East.” *Ibid.*, pg. 56.

²⁹ “It is a prohibition carried over into the New Testament. The position adopted by Paul in the New Testament is not an aberration but is consistent with the heritage present in his Scriptures. The two covenants are in agreement.” *Ibid.*, pg. 117.

2. What about Biblical prohibitions we no longer take notice of – isn't homosexuality like those?

This is a follow-through from the previous argument. Some people say, “But what about individual passages regarding homosexuality, can't they be discounted – after all we don't worry any more about menstrual uncleanness, kosher food, and the twisting together of two types of thread!” In answering this, we must first address how we approach scripture. Negative proof-texting is as bad as positive proof-texting! Isolating verses out of context is not helpful. As we saw last week, any individual passages relating to same-sex practice are to be set in the over-all Biblical view of sexuality. The conservative would point first of all to the setting in which the Bible universally locates God's design for sexual-activity – monogamous heterosexual union. Faithfulness in heterosexual marriage and sexual abstinence in singleness are part of the deep and visible structure of the Bible. The complementarity of male and female physically and emotionally is integral to the doctrine of humanity. We saw that Jesus affirmed this in his discussion on sexuality, when he said that “At the beginning of creation, God made them male and female” (Mark 10:6). Likewise, Paul's argument against same-sex behaviour in Romans 1 is also very clearly set in the context of creation and thus can not be dismissed as cultural or time-conditioned.

Secondly, the material found in Leviticus 18-20 (part of the “Holiness Code”) can be seen as an “expanded commentary” of the Ten Commandments.³⁰ Alongside regulations about ritual purity are major moral prohibitions dealing with adultery and incest, stealing and lying, and honouring one's parents. It is here that we find the great admonition “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). So yes, condemnation of homoerotic activity is listed alongside cultic practices Christ later allowed us to dispense with (Mark 7:1-23), however, it is also alongside prohibitions against adultery and incest; therefore, the ban cannot be dismissed as facilely as some do.

Thirdly, the difference in gravity between homosexual practice and purity laws is seen in the penalties proscribed.³¹ The penalties for breaking purity laws range from the unspecified to forfeiting your crops. However, the penalty for child sacrifice, adultery, bestiality, some forms of incest and homosexual activity is extreme: death (20:13) or being “cut off from their people” (18:29). Now, we know that Jesus did away with death penalty as in the case of woman in adultery, but that did not mean he sanctioned adultery! The fact that the penalty for homosexual practice is the same as that for other major sexual transgressions we still regard as sinful shows it cannot be dismissed as with purity laws.³² Therefore, homosexual practice is to be set in the larger context of God's created order and moral law and not in the same category as laws about ritual purity.

³⁰See Gagnon, *ibid.*, pg. 121.

³¹ The mixing of two different kinds of animals or seed or cloth in Leviticus 19:19 has to do with a transgressing of boundaries. Leviticus 18:23, 20:12 also speak of incest and bestiality in the same way; however, the punishment is for these aberrations is death, showing the greater severity of these actions, whereas the “sowing one's vineyard with a second kind of seed merely leads to forfeiting the whole yield; the sower is not killed (Deuteronomy 22:9).” Gagnon, *ibid.*, n. 214, pg. 136.

³² The only apparent exception to this is having sexual intercourse with a woman “in her menstrual uncleanness” (Leviticus 18:19; 20:18). As this is no longer regarded as a major transgression could it not be said that same-sex unions are the same? To this we could argue that the context of all the laws on sexual relations in Leviticus “legislate against forms of sexual behaviour that disrupt the created order set into motion by the God of Israel. Each of the laws has its intent the channelling of male sexual impulses into a particular pattern of behaviour, a pattern conducive to the healthy functioning of a people set apart to serve God's holy purposes.” (Gagnon, *ibid.*, pg. 136.) In this way, it can be seen that the law against having intercourse with a menstruating woman was to give her “Sabbath rest” from sex and included concern for her privacy and pain; it was “for men to exercise self-restraint and wait for divinely created purposes to run their course.” (Gagnon, *ibid.*, pg. 138.)

3. The Bible condemns only certain forms of homosexuality

This argument says that the homosexual practice the Bible speaks out against is not a loving, committed adult relationship but same-sex activity that exploits others, including the young. However, In Leviticus, the sin is not qualified at all; any man who lies with another male in the manner that men lie with women (i.e. engaging in sexual intercourse) has committed an abomination. There are no exceptions regarding age or whether one of the partners was exploiting the other. Both parties receive the same penalty of death. “The prohibitions against homosexual intercourse are as absolute as the injunctions against incest and adultery. It simply does not matter how well homosexual conduct is done; what matters is that it is done at all. Arguing that non-exploitative forms of homosexuality might have been accepted is like contending that the Holiness Code was only opposed to exploitative forms of incest.”³³

Now, some people say that what was being spoken against was homosexual practice as carried on in the pagan religious rituals of the surrounding Canaanites. People who argue for this say that the mention of child-sacrifice at the beginning and end of the two chapters in Leviticus (18:1-5, 24-30, 20:22-26) show this was the context for the ban on homosexual practice as well. However just because the Bible is against the cultic sacrifice of children doesn't mean that it approves of child-sacrifice in other contexts! What's more, if cult homosexual prostitution was in mind, why not say so?

Others argue that Leviticus was against homosexual unions because they are a procreative dead end – they can't produce children and that's what the provision for male/female unions in Genesis 1 and 2 is all about. Because we now have enough children, it is argued, therefore it is all right to have same-sex activity. However, incest and adultery could result in procreation but are still banned; plus, there is no ban on sex during pregnancy when there is no possibility of procreation.

Still others say that the only homosexuality the Bible is speaking against was that which demeans others by requiring one party to be penetrated such as in the youth/adult male exploitative unions of the classical world. Under this thinking it was all right for a man to penetrate a male of a “lesser” rank such as a younger person, a slave, an enemy, etc. Paul in Romans 1:26-27, they say, was speaking out against this form of same-sex union as “unnatural,” not loving, consenting adult relationships. However, Paul speaks of men “being consumed with passion for one another” (verse 27) indicating the shame was not in the act of one against another but a mutual degradation. Moreover, by including lesbianism in verse 26, which in the ancient Mediterranean world was predominantly mutually consenting women of roughly the same age, Paul shows that he is not speaking about only abusive male, pederastic relationships, but homosexual behaviour in general.

Finally, with respect to Romans 1, Paul's' position that same-sex activity is “contrary to nature” is often countered by the argument that for some, homosexual inclinations are “natural” for them, so why not indulge. However, this is not the sense of the word “natural” to Paul; he is speaking of God's initial design for humanity. After all, there are many other “natural” inclinations we have, such as anger, lust, jealousy, covetousness, etc., which run counter to God's intended design for us and can not be pronounced good simply because they are felt. Many would claim that they are not naturally monogamous and so should have a right to multiple partners but that doesn't mean it should be so! The Biblical condemnation of same-sex activity is not restricted to only certain kinds homosexual behaviour but to all.

³³ Ibid, pg. 347f.

4. Homosexuality has a genetic component that the writers of the Bible did not realize

This argument says, “Haven’t we discovered that homosexual attraction is genetic - inherited and unavoidable?” In other words, if Paul and the ancient writers had known that people are “born gay” they would have looked at the subject differently. First, we should note that just because a condition is genetically inborn, doesn’t mean that it is good and to be followed. I heard recently of a family of many brothers where each had a genetic psychotic predisposition and all are now in jail as a result of their criminal activity. Secondly, while most people with same-sex orientation do not choose this voluntarily, the evidence for genetic origins is very weak indeed, as stated by both pro-and anti-gay practice advocates.³⁴ For example, in the 1991 study of “homosexual brains” by Simon Levay to see if there were any differences between them and “heterosexual brains”, the results were inconclusive because the sample was very small and the methodology flawed. In addition, any differences that were found could be attributable, not to prenatal brain development, but to the effect of subsequent life events such as early childhood trauma or patterns of sexual behaviour much as when those who become blind and take up Braille increase the size of the area of the brain controlled by the reading finger.

Claims for the discovery of a “homosexual gene” have likewise been inconclusive. In studies of identical twins, initial findings showed that in twin sets with at *least* one member of homosexual orientation, both were in only 50% of them. However, later and more accurate studies by the same people have now reduced that figure by half. “If genetics alone accounted for homosexual orientation, then one would never find an instance where identical twins had different sexual orientations. As it is, in most cases where one identical twin has a homosexual orientation the other does not.”³⁵ Additional findings with non-identical twins and siblings point to more significant causes such emotional and other factors in the family environment.

A further argument against a major genetic component is the evidence that sexual orientation of adults can change. NARTH (National Association for research and therapy of Homosexuality) has documented this and the most significant recent findings are by Dr. Jeffrey Spitzer, the psychologist who, in 1973, led the way in getting the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. His studies have now shown him that homosexuality is not a fixed condition and that change is possible.³⁶ All this is to say that the charge that Biblical writers would have changed their views on homosexual conduct if they had known the genetic component are false. In fact the Scriptures support the notion of change as when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:11, “And such *were* some of you.”

The clearest and most obvious causes of homosexual orientation lie not in genetics, but in other factors, including emotional upbringing, childhood trauma, cultural norms, and especially relationships with parents of both genders. The overwhelming evidence points to early developmental deprivations in the relationship with the parent of the same gender coupled with certain personality characteristics. The most succinct writing on this I have seen is an article by psychologist Dr. Jeffery Satinover entitled, “How Might Homosexuality Develop?”³⁷

³⁴ See website for National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH): www.narth.com. For Gagnon’s detailed listing, see *ibid.*, pgs. 396-432.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 461.

³⁶ *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 32, No. 5, October 2003, pp. 403-417, as reported by Roy Waller and Linda A. Nicolosi, “Spitzer Study Just Published: Evidence Found for Effectiveness of Reorientation Therapy”, NARTH website: <http://www.narth.com/docs/evidencefound.html>

³⁷ Available on the NARTH website: www.narth.com.

5. We should be loving and accepting of all people regardless of sexual preference

Those advocating the sanction of same-sex unions argue that Jesus was loving and accepting of outsiders, compared to the religious bigots of his day and therefore would be reaching out to gay and lesbian people today. I agree. However, it does not mean that he approved of same-sex unions. The fact that he was compassionate to the woman caught in adultery and fraternized with tax-collectors and prostitutes does not mean he sanctioned adultery, economic extortion or prostitution! Unlike the religious leaders who condemned the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) he accepted her (“Neither do I condemn you”) but still viewed the act as sinful (“Go and sin no more”). The visit to the home of the extortionist tax collector Zaccheus resulted in repentance, with him restoring what he had taken illegally; he amended his ways.

If we followed this argument of not challenging homosexual practice as a sin to its logical conclusion, then we would never take a stand against any sin and evil. We would wink our eyes (as we used to) at child-abuse, sexual harassment, violence against women, racism and so on. In the Church at Corinth, many there thought they had an “enlightened view” and were willing to “tolerate” the man who had committed incest by sleeping with his father’s wife. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5, takes a firm stand, mourning this conduct (verse 2), calling for temporary expulsion of the offender (verses 2b, 5) because his ultimate salvation and that of the church is at stake (verses 5-6). In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, he shows equal concern to welcome back the now penitent offender.

Far from love and acceptance tolerating sin, love and acceptance require an intolerance of sin. Jesus wants the best for everyone and that means acknowledging that sin is soul-destroying and to be shunned. As Paul says, “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus...Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life” (Romans 6:11, 13). This is the loving way of exhortation to wholeness.

Conclusion

We conclude with a final argument we hear a lot today: “I feel like doing it, therefore I should do it - it will fulfill me.” When Jesus interacted with the rich young ruler, he focussed in on this very moral young man’s key issue: “One thing you lack...Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor” (Mark 10:21). The young man saw his primary identity in the things he possessed. Who he was was bound up in his wealth and status. Jesus was saying to this young man, “Your primary identity is to be as a child of God; you are to receive your primary affirmation through your relationship with him – not your money and possessions.” “A believer’s identity does not consist of the satisfaction of human urges”³⁸ – be they sexual or otherwise. We work out that identity as we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ and having him formed in us. This is not a painless process – so we as individuals and a church must support one another in the struggle of being liberated from bondage to sin.

I end with a quote from Robert Gagnon: “It is not a kindness for a parent to allow a child to play with a scorpion or touch a hot radiator; nor is it a kindness for the church to give its blessing to forms of sexual expression that, as Paul notes, degrades the body created by God...The church must affirm a third option: to love the homosexual by humbly providing the needed support, comfort, and guidance to encourage the homosexual not to surrender to homosexual passions.”³⁹ This is the Bible’s loving stand.



³⁸ Gagnon, *ibid.*, pg. 451.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 485.

Further Reading

One of the best books on the possibility of change:

Mario Bergner: *Setting Love in Order: Hope and healing for the Homosexual*, 1995

Other helpful reading on the subject:

Andy Comisky: *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness*, 1989

Joe Dallas: *Desires in Conflict: Answering the Struggle for Sexual Identity*, 1991

Leanne Payne: *The Broken Image: Restoring Personal Wholeness Through Healing Prayer*, 1981

Leanne Payne: *Crisis in Masculinity*, 1985

Jeffrey Satinover: *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, 1996

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