

The Bible and Homosexuality

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<http://www.progressivechristianalliance.org/Blog/articles/clobbering-the-clobber-passages/>

There are six main biblical passages that Christians typically use to condemn homosexuality, and I'd like to address each of the passages. The passages are the creation story of Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 19:4-5, Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1, I Corinthians 6:9-10, and I Timothy 1:9-10.

As a Christian who takes the Bible seriously, and believes it serves as a guide for faith and practice and is useful for instruction in righteousness, I believe it is necessary for me to take these verses seriously, to understand what they mean, and to change my behavior if I encounter biblical teaching that is contrary to the way I am currently living. I also believe it is necessary for heterosexual Christians to do the same. We are instructed by Paul not to accept any teaching without first trying and testing it. This is, I believe, what I have done with these six scriptures.

The issue hits even a bit closer to home for us, because I am gay, and you are my parents. The three of us are in the middle of this charge of the apostle Paul to test what we have been taught. While others who are not as closely related to the issue at hand may sit back and form an opinion based on what they've heard others say and preach, it is our responsibility to delve into these passages, to study the contexts in which they were written, and to discover what the actual Hebrew and Greek words mean. It is not always the case that the English translation is an accurate one with respect to context and the original language.

I have spent hundreds of hours pouring over these passages, in prayer and a process of discernment, willing to change if the Spirit of God brought to light a meaning opposed to my orientation. However, the more I have studied and prayed, the more I have been assured by that same Spirit that the Bible nowhere condemns homosexuality across the board. It is not my intention in writing this to change your mind on the issue, but simply to show you what I have discovered in this process of discernment. All I ask is that you read it, pray about it, and come to your own conclusions.

I will take each passage as introduced above.

Gen 1:26 - 28 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish

the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

This is the passage I will take least time addressing, because try as I have, the passage cannot be made to condemn homosexuality. What we see in verse 27 is that God created men and women in the image of Himself, blessed them, and gave them charge over the earth. From this passage, we can see that God blesses heterosexual relationships, but not that He condemns homosexual relationships.

I think one of the things that have contributed to this passage being used to condemn homosexuals is intellectual laziness. Westerners are not taught how to properly reason anymore. One of the basic rules of logic is that an argument based on silence is not really an argument at all. If a passage does not teach something, we cannot derive an article of faith or practice from it. This basic rule of logical engagement holds true here.

Genesis 1 (and the creation story at large) simply blesses heterosexuality. The passage is silent on the issue of homosexuality, and really, why should it not be? The creation story was not written as a theological treatise or an early form of "Faith and Practice." It is a story that tells us that we are God's creation, that we are blessed, that He created us good. To deduce from this original blessing that God condemns homosexuality is not only mistaken, it is a dishonest use of scripture.

Some have said that the charge from God to "be fruitful and multiply" implicitly condemns homosexuality since homosexuals are unable to have children. The answer to that line of reasoning is a bit laughable in its simplicity. If those who say this are right, does that then mean that heterosexual couples who are unable to have children are also condemned? How about people who feel God has called them to a life of singleness or couples who simply choose not to have children? Jesus himself even commends those who choose to be eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 19:10-12). The instructions of God to produce offspring are instructions given to Adam and Eve, and could possibly be taken as a generalization for life thereafter. But it is not a necessary universal principle. Again, to make it one is to ignore the context and to be dishonest with scripture.

Gen 19:4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, *even* the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; Gen 19:5 and they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men that came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them.

The story of Sodom is probably one of the most misunderstood, misinterpreted, and abused stories in the entire Bible. There are many issues I want to raise concerning this passage. I will do so numerically and in the form of questions, and then I will elaborate on each point.

1. Was *every man* in Sodom a homosexual?
2. Why would Lot offer homosexual men his daughters?
3. Are there any cultural peculiarities of the ancient Middle East that would help us understand this passage?
4. Do other passages in the Bible expound on the sin of Sodom? If so, what do they have to say about it?

The passage says that every man, young and old, from every quarter of the city, demanded that Lot give up the two male visitors to be raped. It is amazing to me that someone can read this passage and come away with the idea that committed homosexual relationships are being condemned. I think the only way that such an interpretation can happen is the continual ingraining of perpetual sermons opposed to homosexuality in which this passage is used as the text.

It is simply not possible that the men of any city, then or now, would be completely homosexual. There must have been some heterosexual men. This fact alone should tell us that there is more to the story than meets the eye. There must be some contextual ingredient we are missing, because otherwise, the plot just makes no sense. If the passage said “*some* of the men of the city” demanded to rape the visitors, an anti-homosexual reading may make more sense. But the fact that the passage states ***all*** the men of the city wanted to rape the visitors puts up a warning sign: why would every single man of a city want to have sex with two male visitors? {see cultural context below for an answer}

Another factor directly from the story showing that the passage is not about homosexual men is this: Lot offered his daughters to appease the men. If Lot knew the men of the city were homosexual, what could he have possibly been thinking by doing this? There is no way to understand this part of the story if we do not first look at the cultural background of the ancient Middle East.

Cultural Context

It was common for cities in the ancient Middle East to be wary and outright unwelcoming towards strangers. There was a city, and even more, a way of life to protect. Any unknown person (or group of people) coming into a city was often not welcome. It was also common within the culture to shame a man by forcing him into anal intercourse. Opposed to this culture of unwelcome was the Jewish teaching of hospitality. As you will see shortly, it was this lack of hospitality that was seen as the sin of Sodom, not any kind of sexual act. To the Jewish people, not welcoming the stranger (aka “the alien”) was an abomination. It was expressly forbidden by Yahweh.

It is this sin that the men of Sodom were trying to commit. They were attempting to intimidate and shame the angelic visitors by raping them. The story is not at all one about homosexual relationships, but one primarily about hospitality and a welcoming

into the community. Ironically, rather than condemning homosexuality, the true meaning of the Sodom story condemns an unwelcoming stance towards those who are different.

Biblical Expositions of the sin of Sodom

Notice in the passages below that the sin of Sodom was not homosexuality, but rather oppression, lack of care for the outcast, and inhospitality.

Isa 1:9-17 Except Jehovah of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, we should have been like unto Gomorrah. Hear the word of Jehovah, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Say Jehovah: I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; new moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies, – I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Eze 16:49 Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fulness of bread, and prosperous ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.

It is evident from the Genesis 19 story of Sodom itself, and from the expositions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, that the sin of Sodom was not homosexuality, but rather oppression, lack of care for the outcast, and inhospitality. It takes nothing more than reading at face value and a bit of contextual evaluation to discover the true meaning of the story.

Lev 18:22 Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.

It is absolutely necessary to understand the historical and religious contexts of the Levitical laws before understanding the meaning of the laws. The laws are given in Leviticus for a very specific purpose – to separate the early Hebrews from the pagans surrounding them. Leviticus 18:22 is a ritual, religious code, specifically for the high priests of the Jewish religion. The prohibition found in verse 22 is within the context of commands for Jewish priests not to participate in *idolatrous sexuality of any kind* (see vss. 21, 24) including the worship of Molech. It was for the express purpose of calling them out as a different people from the tribes around them (vs. 24).

More to the point, the word translated “abomination” is the Hebrew word *toevah*, meaning “ritually unclean.” The aspect of ritual is necessary for understanding the meaning of the word. It is only related to religious purification, in the sense of being

unpolluted by surrounding religious ideologies. It does not imply something that is intrinsically evil. That is why the same word is used for eating pork, shellfish, lobster, meat more than three days old, trimming beards, etc. The main idea is ethnic contamination, not intrinsically immoral activity.

If the authors of Leviticus wanted to condemn homosexuality as an inherently moral evil, there was a perfectly good Hebrew word they could have used: *zimah*. This is the Hebrew word which means “wrong in itself.” Once we understand the religious context of the Levitical laws and the meaning of the Hebrew word *toevah*, we see that Leviticus 18:22 is not about homosexuality per se, but about male temple prostitution as practiced by the surrounding pagan religions. See I Kings 14:24 as a cross reference.

Rom 1:25 – 27 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile passions: for their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another, men with men working unseemliness, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was due.

It is helpful to read the entire first chapter of Romans before coming to any kind of the judgment on the homosexual behaviors mentioned in Romans 1: 26, 27. For sure, the chapter does speak to certain kinds of homosexual sex. When read in context of the entire first chapter, and with Leviticus 18:22 and I Kings 14:24 as cross references, it becomes evident what Paul is actually writing about.

The chapter is set within the framework of idolatry, specifically making reference to sexual prostitution in sacred, pagan temples. What is really interesting to note is that in verses 24 and 25 of Romans chapter 1, Paul seems to be describing immoral heterosexual acts, the degrading of bodies and sexual impurity of heterosexual temple prostitution. Why then, would verses 26 and 27 not also be about temple prostitution?

There is an order that Paul takes when going from verse 18 to verse 32. Paul is talking about people who have seen the hand of God in the created order, but have chosen to worship that creation rather than the One Who created it. It is this act of making idols of the created order that this sexual immorality takes place. How is this possibly related to committed homosexual relationships, specifically Christian ones? Paul’s attention, when writing Romans 1:18-32 is squarely on pagan idolatry. If he wanted to condemn homosexual relationships outright, why do so within an explicit context of pagan idolatry?

1Cor 6:9 -10 Or know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

1Tim 1:9 – 10 The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and unruly, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for abusers of themselves with men, for menstealers, for liars, for false swearers, and if there be any other thing contrary to the sound doctrine;

I will deal with the Corinthians and Timothy passages simultaneously since they utilize the same Greek words, *arsenokoitai* and *malakos*. These terms are ambiguous in their meaning (see how various translations differ in their renderings), and the word *arsenokoitai* seems to have been coined by Paul himself. It is not used before he used it in I Corinthians, and is very rarely used after him by other non-biblical authors. It is probably that Paul coined the word by combining two words from the Greek Septuagint in reference to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 – *arsen* “male” and *koite* “bed.

It has been translated most often as “sodomites” (though the sin of the Sodom had nothing to do with homosexuality), “homosexuals” (a blatant mistranslation), “homosexual offenders,” and “abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV). Luther actually translated it as “child abusers,” which if taken to mean pederasts may be closest to the original meaning. None of these translations are completely accurate however.

Whatever the case, *arsenokoitai* expresses certain homosexual actions, not identity. Had Paul wanted to express homosexuality within a mutual relationship, there were other commonly used Greek words available to him. He coined *arsenokoitai* for a specific reason. Just as in Romans 1, Paul takes his idea of homosexual behavior from Leviticus. As we’ve already discussed concerning Leviticus 18:22 and Romans 1:26-28, Paul condemned homosexual behavior only as it related to temple prostitution or idolatry.

The other Greek word used in these passages is *malakoi*. It is typically translated as “effeminate” or “homosexual prostitute.” The literal meaning of the word is “soft.” What is strange about the translation of *malakoi* as “effeminate” is that in Paul’s day, most men who participated in homosexuality did not have their manhood called into question. In fact, the word *malakos* can be found used for certain heterosexuals in Greek literature of the same period. The most reasonable translation is “those of moral weakness” or “soft in morality.”

The whole anti-homosexual Christian culture is based on six passages of scripture, three in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament. As I have shown, none of the passages present a blanket condemnation of homosexuality. In two of the New Testament passages, biblical scholars do not even know for certain what Paul was talking about.

It is not blasphemous to question theological and doctrinal positions that have been handed down to us. In fact, it is blasphemous not to question the teaching we receive. The Church had it wrong for so long on the humanity of black people and the humanity of slaves. Might it be possible that it has also been wrong on the question of homosexuality? Let the evidence speak for itself.