

Homosexuality and the Bible... Bad News Or Good News?

Copyright 1994 Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.
Revised by Nathan L. Meckley...Originally published as:
'Homosexuality: What the Bible Does and Does not Say' ©1984

Is The Bible...Bad News Or Good News?

Lesbians and gay men face discrimination because of societal attitudes. Unfortunately, these attitudes are often taught by the church. Sadly, the Bible is often used as a weapon to "bash" gays and lesbians. It is important to remember that such hurtful things are not a reflection of Christ, or the way God wants the church to be, or even what the Bible really says. They are the products of the fallible and imperfect human beings who guide these churches.

Ultimately, a Christian's personal faith should not depend upon a particular church or clergyperson, but rather it should be solidly placed in Jesus Christ. In addition to the biased teachings of certain ministers, Scripture sometimes presents a stumbling block for people who are both homosexual and Christian.

Thoughtful Bible study reveals that the Bible does have Good News for gays and lesbians, and it does not say what you may have thought it did about homosexuals!

Understanding The Bible In A New Way...

There are at least **two important things** to keep in mind when reading the Bible.

First, you must always consider its context. In order to understand any writing (whether it be a letter, a speech, or even the Bible) it is necessary to understand its background. Think about who is speaking, to whom it is addressed, why it written, and what the culture was like.

In the case of Scripture, the cultural and social context of Biblical times was very different from our own. For example, when the Bible says God commands humanity to "increase and multiply," remember, among other things, this was addressed to Israel, a small, desert nation surrounded by many enemies. They needed to "multiply" just to survive.

Secondly, the Bible began as an oral tradition and then was written in ancient languages (primarily Hebrew in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament) over many centuries. It was copied and re-copied in the original languages, and then translated into other languages. As anyone who speaks or reads more than one language will understand, translating requires interpretation and personal judgement. Even with the best of intentions, translators and copyists are quite capable of human error.

Sodom, Creation And The Law:

Hebrew Scripture tells an exciting story of epic scope and includes many books and writings. It was the Bible Jesus knew and studied. For Christians, it continues to serve as the foundation of faith history. It also contains some of the most popular quotes used against lesbians and gays.

What was the sin of Sodom in Genesis 19:1-28?

This Old Testament passage is often wrongly used as "biblical proof" that God is displeased with homosexuals. According to many people these cities were destroyed because residents committed the "sin of homosexuality." To suggest that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexuality is to misinterpret Scripture.

The prophet Ezekiel, in an equally inspired book of the Bible, tells that God was displeased with Sodom for very different reasons: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did detestable things before me (literally, 'committed idolatry'). Therefore I did away with them as you have seen. (Ezekiel 16:49-50, New International version".

In every other reference in the Bible

(and there are several) the condemned "sins of Sodom" are such things as pride and inhospitality. The people of Sodom broke the law of hospitality to strangers which was so religiously observed in their culture. Use of the expression "bring these men out to us, that we may know them" (Genesis 19:5) is the basis for most of the misinterpretation. The Hebrew verb yadha ("to know") used here is found 943 times in the Hebrew Scriptures and in only ten places does it mean sexual intercourse - each time referring to heterosexual relations. But even if the people of Sodom did attempt a "homosexual" attack upon the angels, the passage would serve as a clear condemnation of rape (certainly an extreme form of inhospitality). Rape, either heterosexual or homosexual, is sin under any circumstances.

"God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve,"

is a familiar refrain heard from those who reject lesbians and gays. Unlike other references, Genesis 1 and 2 are believed to condemn homosexuality because it is not mentioned. This argument from silence is difficult to support. First, Eve was created not just for sexual reproduction, but companionship (Gen. 2:18). This is certainly the basis of most love relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual. Also, the accounts of Creation and the early stories of Genesis are an explanation - not a prescription. Taking these stories as literal guidelines would lead to peculiar conclusions. For example, it would imply that brothers and sisters make suitable husbands and wives. How else could Adam and Eve's children have multiplied? Using Scripture in such a manner raises more difficult questions than it answers.

Other Hebrew scriptures are selectively used

to show the Bible condemns a gay lifestyle. Two are found in the book of Leviticus, 18:22 and 20:13: "Thou shalt not lie with a man as thou would like with a woman." Anyone who quotes these prohibitions should read the entire chapters or the whole book of Leviticus. Levitical law demands no eating of pork, lobster, shrimp, oysters, or rare meat; no intercourse during the menstrual period; no interbreeding of cattle; and a whole host of others laws, including the law to kill all people who commit adultery.

New Testament References to Homosexuality...

The Law Of Love:

What is the fundamental message of the Bible and Gospel of Jesus?

As Christians, we believe the Hebrew Scripture is a divinely inspired revelation of God's covenant with God's chosen people, and a relevant study of Hebrew history. Above all, it is part of a continuing story and promise of redemption. Additionally, as Christians, our law is from Christ and that law is the Law of Love. Its cornerstone is the two-fold commandment to "love God and love your neighbor as yourself."

Neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor any of the New Testament Scriptures imply that Christians are held to the cultic or ethical rules of the law of Moses. Paul clearly taught that Christians are no longer under the Old Law (Galatians 3:23-25); that the Old Law is brought to completion in Christ (Romans 10:4); and its fulfillment is in love (Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:14). Jesus did deal with human sexuality in an open and unthreatened manner. He affirmed on one hand the goods of marriage, but also declared marriage is not for everyone (Matthew 19:3-12). Furthermore, the Bible **does not record one word** spoken by Jesus condemning homosexuality.

It Sounds Greek To Me!

In the New Testament there are three scriptures often cited to show the "sinfulness of homosexuality." There are many English translations of the Bible and each of them uses different English words to translate the passages from ancient Greek, so some words will depend upon which version or translation is used. Two Greek words are used by Paul in two similar passages. They are *malakos* and *arsenokoitai*. These words are used in I Corinthians 6:9 and in I Timothy 1:10. Literally translated, *malakos* means "soft" and *arsenokoitai* means "male-bed."

Neither word meant "homosexual" in the Greek used during Paul's time. Unfortunately, Biblical language scholars disagree on what these words really did mean in the context of these two passages or to the people to whom Paul wrote. There were many Greek words for same-sex activity or "homosexuals," but Paul did not select them. Somehow translators have attached various "homosexual" meanings to these two words.

Notice the following versions of an excerpt from I Corinthians 6:9 . (I Timothy 1:10 is very similar):

-King James: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,

-New International: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders,

-Revised Standard: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts,

-Jerusalem Bible: people of immoral lives, idolaters, adulterers, catamites, sodomites,

-New English: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion,

Which version is closest to what was intended when the original words did not mean "homosexual"? It is strange that some preachers confidently condemn gays and lesbians when scholars and different translations of the Bible do not even agree upon what certain words actually mean!

Romans 1:26-27 is the third New Testament passage often cited:

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men . . ."(Revised Standard version)

Does this passage actually condemn people who are **"naturally"** or **"constitutionally"** homosexual? It says you should not indulge in sexual behavior that is unnatural for you. It specifically says heterosexuals should not try to become homosexuals. It could equally be understood to say gays and lesbians should not try to become heterosexuals.

John McNeill, a Roman Catholic scholar, says there is ample evidence that Biblical authors probably had in mind what we would also call perversion, namely, the indulgence in homosexual activity by those who were, by nature, heterosexual.. However, the authors would have expected all people to be naturally heterosexual. In fact, their ancient understanding of "nature" itself was different.

For example, the Apostle Paul declares that long hair is unnatural for men (I Cor. 11:14). Paul believed "nature" to reflect expected characteristics or cultural norms, rather than a modern belief in universal scientific or biological "laws of nature."

As Norman Pittenger, an Anglican theologian, states;

"For a man or woman whose sexual desire and drive is inevitably towards the same gender, acting in

homosexual physical expression is in fact a way of glorifying God and opening the self to the working of the divine love in human affairs."

"I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean". (Romans 14:14) RSV

The Bible Is Good News!

In making these observations, we are not attempting to downgrade the Bible, or to deny the authority of its inspiration or its importance in Christian life. On the contrary, we affirm that the Bible has much to say to us, but we must hear and *learn what it does say*, **not** *what someone tells us it says* - namely, the people who have translated it, and people who have interpreted it.

People are capable of making mistakes

and building doctrines which the Bible itself does not teach, but which are accepted by others. Can we actually believe that a Christ who preached love, lived love (with women, foreigners, sinners, and outcasts), who gave his life on a cross to show God's love for all people - can we believe that a Christ of such love, who recognizes the human need for love and its physical fulfillment, would require legions of homosexuals to live a life of celibacy, denying their natural need for intimacy, or face damnation? Not the loving Christ found in the Bible !

Jesus died for our sins, not for our sexuality.

Jesus liberates us to a new life of love in God. Neither heterosexual love nor homosexual love is sinful in itself. Sex acts become sinful when we exploit or abuse another person, abandoning the ways of love. The relationship of two women or two men can be just as loving as a relationship between a woman and a man. Christ died for the sins of both homosexual and heterosexual persons. Therefore, gays and lesbians can freely come to the saving grace of Jesus Christ and still retain their identity and the authentic expression of their sexuality.

Recommended Resources:

The following resources are recommended for studying the issues of homosexuality and Christianity:

Brochures:

Eastman, Donald (1990)
Not A Sin, Not a Sickness: What the Bible Does and Does Not Say
Los Angeles: Universal Fellowship Press.

Truluck, Buddy (1991). The Bible As Your Friend: A Guide for Lesbians and Gays. Los Angeles: Universal Fellowship Press.

Wilson, Nancy (1992) Our Story Too: Lesbians and Gay Men in the Bible. Los Angeles: Universal Fellowship Press.

Books:

Boswell, John (1980). Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Edwards, George R. (1979). *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective*. New York: Pilgrim Press.

Helminiak, Daniel A. (1994). *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press.

Horner, Tom (1978). *Johnathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Bible Times*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

McNeill, John J. (1988). *The Church and the Homosexual*. Boston: Beacon Press. Orig. pub. 1976

Scanzoni, Letha and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (1994). *Is The Homosexual My Neighbor* New York: Harper and Collins. Originally published 1978.