

Homosexuality

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A Christian Attitude to the Church, Society and Homosexuality

Christianity proposes a meaning for life both in church and in society. That meaning is based upon the Scriptures and evident reason. Because the source of the Christian perspective on moral and social issues is biblical, and the Christian desire is to live in our world in a godly way, Christians are frequently at odds with the views of people around them.

The understanding of life by Christians begins with the particular revelation that God created the world in which we live. Thus, the way one lives most completely in this world is in a way consistent with the character of creation and the nature of God. With regard to sexuality the biblical view is seen in the original creation: "God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27 NRSV). In the enlarged focus on creation of the man and woman in Genesis 2:24, God says, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh."

Everything else that the Bible says about marriage and sexual relationships is consistent with this intention of a sexual relationship between a man and a woman, and not between people of the same sex. Thus when the Bible speaks of the sanctity of marriage, it speaks of the serious consequences of a man and a woman not keeping their marriage promise, so divorce is wrong. The prophet Malachi gives God's perspective on this, "I hate divorce" (Mal. 2:16). Part of Malachi's question is, "what does God desire?" God's answer in Malachi 2:15

is, "godly offspring." This sort of perspective puts Christians at odds with homosexuality.

When the biblical revelation speaks about homosexual relations, it consistently opposes them. A summary of the biblical view is that homosexual relations express a rebellion against the order that God intended for the world. There have been attempts to reinterpret the Greek or Hebrew words for homosexuality not in the sense we mean them in our day, but generally those attempts ignore the context of the passages and impose meanings that may not belong to the first century, or the specific time of Leviticus.¹

It is important when we look at the biblical texts to keep in mind that the Scriptures oppose the sexual practice of homosexual relations, not homosexual inclinations.² But, in light of what we consider a biblical view of homosexuality, we must not allow ourselves to become homophobic. Christians can be vulnerable to stereotypes. From the Christian perspective, homosexual practice is a sin since it offends against the order of God's creation as we understand it from the Scriptures; but it is a sin on the same level that adultery and divorce and spousal abuse offend against the biblical worldview. When we trust the revelation of God in Scripture, then we oppose, on moral grounds, all of the practices Scripture speaks against. God loves the world but does not tolerate sin, and God desires to draw sinful people to himself. For Christians, loving people and judging their moral wrongs are not exclusive acts, for that balance is how God acts.

Given this background, let us consider, in brief, the biblical passages that speak against homosexual sex acts. All the passages speak against homosexual practice because that sexual practice violates God's plan for creation. Our view is that these biblical passages have been understood in a consistent manner across 2,000 years of church history. The important fact about the biblical passages is that they all stand on one side.

Two passages are part of the Old Testament law: Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13. In general terms, the Old Testament law describes both what God is opposed to and what he loves, so the law is an insight into the character of God.

The practices these chapters condemn include incest, bestiality, child sacrifice, adultery and homosexuality. One sees how seriously wrong they are in the penalty the Leviticus passages proscribe, which is death. In both passages, homosexual acts are called "an abomination," or, as the word might be translated, "something disgusting." The word suggests that in homosexual sex, a boundary has been crossed that makes such acts particularly heinous to God. Of all of the sexual acts mentioned in these chapters of Leviticus, only homosexual acts are called "an abomination." The line that is crossed is the line of male-female sexuality envisaged in the creation in Genesis.

Jesus does not speak about homosexuality. The question is, how shall we interpret his silence? Jesus did not speak about a lot of issues, but we may argue from inference based upon other issues Jesus did speak about. When, for example, Jesus discusses divorce in Mark 10, he references "from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female..." supporting the creation model of Genesis. Then, in a variety of other settings, Jesus supports the Mosaic law. His support of the Mosaic law, which includes the laws

of Leviticus, infers that he would not take a different position from the law on this issue of homosexuality.

The most explicit passage in the Bible about homosexuality is in Romans I, particularly verses 24-27 where Paul condemns both homosexual and lesbian acts.³ The context is Paul's discussion of those acts that humans do that are denials of God's reality. Paul's argument is that all humans are sinful. Both idolatry and homosexual acts are "contrary to nature" or "against nature." Paul means that these acts are done by people who deliberately choose a lifestyle opposed to God's pattern in order that they might claim a freedom from God's order. The word "exchanged" that Paul uses here is important. The people who have forsaken God have exchanged something good for something bad in two particular areas: in the truth about God and in the dishonoring of sexual relations from what God intended they be at creation. Homosexual acts are Paul's initial, vivid example of the moral confusion of those humans who have refused to acknowledge that God is the Creator. Paul's conclusion is that God is going to judge these people since they aren't acting out of ignorance, but rather, they are acting against knowledge they do have.⁴

In Romans 14:1-15:13, Paul argues that believers must stop judging one another, but Paul is there referring to things indifferent (the word is *adiaphora*), like diet and so on. Sexual morality is not a matter of indifference to Paul. Same sex intercourse is a matter of depraved or debased sexuality (Rom. 1:28). It is not a matter of indifference.⁵

It is further important that Paul singles out in Romans 1:24-27 same sex activity before he provides a list of vices in verses 29-32. Paul's model is Genesis 1 and 2, but his argument is that homosexual practice is a consequence of the social structure of a society being

damaged by sin, so that the consequence of asserting human freedom against God's pattern for life is a loss of sensitivity to God's pattern. In Ephesians 4, Paul calls this sort of thing, "living in the futility of their minds," "darkened in their understanding," "alienated from the life of God," and "loss of sensitivity." All sorts of impurity and greed fit into this alienation, not merely homosexuality.

The other important verses in the New Testament are I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:8-10. These passages define homosexual sex as a sin whose consequence is serious. People practicing homosexuality face a serious consequence. They cannot inherit God's kingdom. In these verses, the meanings of the Greek words are important, as one can see from the wide variety of translations of the words. There is a conflict over the meaning of the words, and hence the meaning is best derived from what Paul is doing in the immediate context. He is defining those acts that exclude people from God's kingdom.⁶ In homosexual and lesbian relations, the male/female roles may be reversed, but that doesn't change the significance of the meaning of the words to describe homosexual activity, nor does that shift of meaning change the context of sin Paul is working with.

All sorts of cultural questions have been posed of these biblical passages: is the issue of homosexuality important for the biblical writers? Do they speak with one voice about the issue? Is the biblical perspective valid in contemporary society or have scientific insights or cultural changes affected the significance of what is in the Bible? Is there a difference between abusive sexual relations with young boys and mutual caring homosexual relationships between adults? To answer questions like these, we maintain that the biblical critique of homosexual practice is consistently drawn in light of God's plan

for sexuality in Genesis 1 and 2. That plan is for a male and a female to be joined together sexually within the covenant of marriage.

Several conclusions may be drawn. When the Scriptures speak about homosexual acts, they always condemn them. It is the act which is at issue here, not inclinations or feelings. Against the view maintained by some today that homosexuality is not a chosen behavior, but rather is genetically determined, the sum of the evidence seems to be that genetic influence is too weak to be significant in comparison with societal and environmental factors.⁷ People choose these acts and they are acts of human sin and rebellion against the pattern of the life God wants people to lead.

For a church in our society to strive to live out a biblical worldview is crucial. The Christian church has always lived with a two-fold problem. On the one hand, it has stood in opposition to the moral choices of a society not concerned with godliness. On the other hand, it has made accommodations to that same society in which it lives. Non-conformity with the world has long been characteristic of the Brethren in Christ. Such non-conformity sometimes means separation from the world. It must involve instruction about how to live rightly, and it must have support from the community of those believers who are intent upon obeying God as they see his pattern for living defined in the Bible.

Notes:

¹ Cf. John Boswell in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago, U of Chicago Press, 1980. His argument that Paul is not discussing persons who are by inclination homosexual has been critiqued by scholars like Richard B. Hays, in a 1986 article in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 14, pp 184-215 and in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, San Francisco, Harper, 1996; and by David Wright in an article in *Vigiliae Christianae*, 61, 1989, pp 125-153 and in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 61(1989), pp 291-300. Another book that deals with both Boswell and the larger issues is Robert A. Gagnon's, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Nashville, Abingdon, 2001.

² Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse in *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate*, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2000, explore this intersection.

³ In general use, homosexuality refers to both the sexual relations of men with men and women with women. But homosexuality is also used to refer to male with male, whereas the term "lesbian" is used to refer to sexual relations between women.

⁴ Note that this perspective suggests why abortion is wrong. It is because that act also seeks to allow a person to be free from God's purposes for sex. It is indeed a question of choice, but the choice is to sin or not.

⁵ There is another argument set forth by people like Gagnon that rests upon the physical nature of humans. Look at the physiological shape of men and women and the fact that their different physical characteristics are exactly what produce children, a demonstration of what God says, in Genesis, he intends. The complementary sexual instruments of women and men are part of the character of God's creation.

⁶ The two words are: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. The first word has the connotation "soft," and refers to the passive or effeminate male who assumes the role of female in a homosexual relation. The second word consists of the word for "male," and the word for "bed." It may be translated as "the male who takes another male to bed," that is, the one who assumes the dominant role in a homosexual relation. Danker, 3rd ed of Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, U of Chicago, 2000 gives some of the choices, as does Gagnon, pp 303-339.

⁷ See Jones and Yarhouse, as well as Gagnon, pp 395-432.