

THE BIBLE AND SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Significant Passages of Scripture to Consider in Discussion of General Assembly Action Regarding Marriage

By Colin Kerr

Q: Doesn't the Bible condemn same-sex marriage?

We Presbyterians who support same-sex marriage affirm that the Bible, when faithfully interpreted in its historical context and original languages, and with the full counsel of Scripture, does not condemn same-sex marriage.

Q: Isn't Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 destroyed because they practiced homosexuality?

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is somewhat surprisingly one of the most cited passages for condemning same-sex relationships. Surprising, because for over a thousand years Jewish theologians never interpreted the passage that way. Even when we read of this story by the time of the New Testament in Jude 1:7, the author implies it was the attempted rape of angels, or "strange flesh", that symbolized the twin cities' evil. Contrary to the revisionist view applied by some theologians, the "sin" for which these two cities were destroyed was not homosexuality, but inhospitality. Genesis 18 records the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah towards three angelic visitors, and Hebrew theologians noted the explicit contrast in the following story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Trying to gang-rape angelic guests is not hospitable to say the least, especially in an ancient Semitic culture that vowed to protect visitors at any and all costs. It is also apparent from the text that this was not a gang of homosexuals trying to prey on Lot's guests, but actually an entire mob of otherwise heterosexual men and boys. The passage clearly records "all the people to the last man" came out to Lot's home. Reflecting a common (though not universal) ancient Mediterranean understanding that same-sex attraction was compatible *in addition to* a baseline opposite-sex attraction, the author of Genesis takes for granted that this is a heterosexual crowd desiring to engage in violent non-consensual homosexual actsⁱ⁻ⁱⁱⁱ. It simply has no moral bearing on a same-sex marriage between a loving and monogamous couple.

Q: Doesn't Leviticus condemn same-sex marriage in 18:19 and 20:18? "*You shall not lie (koites) with a male (arseno) as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.*" (NASB)

First, we at least have to look at the texts surrounding Leviticus 18:22 to understand what it means.

You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God; I am the Lord. You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination. Also you shall not have intercourse with any animal to be defiled with it, nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it; it is a perversion. -Leviticus 18:21-13 (NASB)

The line preceding verse 22 commands the Hebrews not sacrifice their children to the pagan god Molech. The line following verse 22 forbids women from having sex with animals. It should give us immediate pause that male homosexuality and female bestiality are named to the exclusion of female homosexuality and male bestiality. Leviticus is nothing if not exhaustive, so it would be particularly odd that if the Hebrew community understood homosexuality to be inherently disordered, they would then leave out forbidding expressions of female homosexuality. Moreover, if verse 22 was intended to be a law on normative human sexuality, it's in a very peculiar place. The list of rules pertaining to who isn't allowed to sleep with whom continues on from verses 6 through 20. Sacrificing children in verse 21 signals a clear shift in theme, which would seem to

include verses 22 and 23. But if verse 22 isn't about condemning same-sex relationships, what is it condemning?

Much of Leviticus, with all its specificity, is written as a response to the depraved culture and religion of the Canaanites, the people who the Hebrews are in the process of displacing. Even very theologically conservative historians believe that the prohibitions on child sacrifice, male homosexuality, and female bestiality are specifically referring to the most offensive cultic rituals of the Canaanites as they worshiped their false gods^{iv}. This also provides further potential explanation for why female homosexuality is not mentioned in the text. Reflecting an ancient worldview that attached inferiority to being sexually penetrated, male penetration by another male and female penetration by an animal would have been seen as the epitome of defilement^{v-vi}. Far from then a comprehensive condemnation on monogamous same-sex relationships, our passage in Leviticus is more accurately understood as a strictly gender-based prohibition of homosexual acts used in fertility rites, religious orgies, and temple prostitution.

Understanding Leviticus in this way also reconciles an inconsistency with the other Jewish law book, Deuteronomy. It maintains the rules on normative sexuality that one would expect, such as those against bestiality and incest, but it leaves out any condemnation that could even be construed as a prohibition against same-sex relationships. In fact, Deuteronomy 23:17-18 appears to be the appropriate parallel to Leviticus 18:22, commanding that,

“None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute. You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.” (ESV)

When we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, Deuteronomy provides confirmation that Leviticus 18:22 is condemning homosexual acts only within the specific scope of cult prostitution. Even today, the majority of Jewish scholars and the majority of the Jewish faith have rescinded those extra-biblical condemnations of same-sex relationships and welcomed LGBT people unconditionally into the synagogue community.

Q: Does Timothy 1:9-10 condemn same-sex marriage? *“But for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals (arsenokoites) and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching.” (NASB)*

The translation of the Greek word arsenokoites as “homosexual” doesn't appear until the 14th century, when the Wycliffe English version of the Bible interpreted it to mean “thei that don leccherie with men.” However, when comparing the use of arsenokoites in non-biblical New Testament-era Greek manuscripts, there is very little use of the word found in all of our retained Greek literature. In the few places where it is used, it is either about economic exploitation occasionally homosexual and heterosexual rape.

This has led many conservative biblical scholars to suggest that Paul likely coined the word himself. So if we're to be entirely honest, no one can be completely certain what Paul meant in this passage when he invents the phrase arsenokoites. Given that Paul had an ample array of words to sample from so as to describe homosexuality in a way his readers would clearly recognize, it is particularly intriguing that he practically invents this word. The most common theory, proposed widely by conservative theologians, is that Paul is compounding arseno and koites, which taken separately literally means “man” and “bed.” If Paul did indeed compound arseno and koites together, he would be doing so with some Jewish context in mind. Paul was a first century Pharisee by training after all. As it turns out, Paul's translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Greek Septuagint (which had already been read by Jews everywhere for two centuries prior), uses these exact words in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Paul, according to the conservative theory, seems to be constructing a parallel back to Leviticus, back to when the Hebrew people entered the Promised Land to become the nation of Israel. However, as it has already been demonstrated Leviticus refers to temple prostitution. So perhaps Paul is condemning temple prostitution, but we can't even be sure of that.

Q: Does Corinthians 6:9-10 condemn same-sex marriage? *“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate (malakos), nor homosexuals (arsenokoites), nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.”*

Paul here again uses arsenokoites in a way that most translations interpret to mean homosexuals. The argument would be no different from our previous discussion except that some theologians have jumped on the word preceding arsenokoites. The word, malakos, usually translated in contemporary Bibles as “effeminate,” has recently been held up by some as evidence that Paul was referencing both passive and active partners in a homosexual relationship.

This is something of an ad hoc argument, though, since for hundreds of years Christians, including the likes of Martin Luther and Jean Calvin, effectively translated the word to mean “weakling” without even the remotest connection to homosexuality. It was not until the 1600s that translators began to interpret malakos as effeminate in the newly minted King James Bible and not until the 1900s that any Bible identified the word with homosexuality^{vii}.

A significant difference with malakos compared to arsenokoites, is that there is ample evidence of what it really means, literally, “soft.” However, the deeper cultural meaning incorporates the sexist language of the ancient world that associated women with weakness, vanity, emotionalism, and uncontrolled passion. This diverse pejorative turned malakos into a word that was used to describe an entire range of behaviors. It is true that malakos was on some occasions in Greek writings, used to describe men who desired to be penetrated, though it seems as if this was almost entirely confined to men who were already engaging in heterosexual sex acts^{viii}. But malakos was most often used to describe those who were decadent, weak-willed, vain, and even very attractive boys. Even in a sexual context, the most frequent referrals are about men submitting to women.

So is Paul using malakos to mean a callboy, a playboy, or a decadent, vain person? We simply can’t know, but since the words pathikos and kinaidos would have clearly indicated a passive homosexual partner, we can logically rule out that malakos would have been used for that particular meaning. Additionally, because Paul also doesn’t place this word next to arsenokoites in 1 Timothy 1:8-11, it would be an incredible leap to say Paul could have ever intended these words to be corresponding passive and active male partners. But even if he did, consider what we conclusively know about arsenokoites potentially referring to temple prostitution. At most, and it is quite a stretch to get even here, malakos could refer to male temple prostitutes and arsenokoites to the men that visit the temple for sexual services. At any rate, this can hardly be taken as blanket condemnation of same-sex relationships.

Q: Unlike Corinthians and Timothy, Romans 1:26-27 clearly condemns same-sex erotic behavior for both men and women. How can this be mistranslation? *“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”* (ESV)

Paul describes a complex descent into sin beginning many verses earlier in Romans 1, but what should be very clear for any reader in the chronology and context of Paul’s narrative in Romans 1 is that this has absolutely nothing to do with same-sex relationships. This is not an ambiguous, generalized portrayal of non-Christians. Paul is painting a picture of the pagan religious industry and its consumers. This likely was epitomized by either the Temple of Aphrodite itself or a Cybeline cult in Corinth. The former had its prostitution ring that would have operated in the temple or around the city, while the latter actually hosted orgies of men and women who mutilated their sex organs to achieve a state of “genderless transcendence.”^{ix}

Moreover, Paul is speaking specifically about people who have rejected God, worship idols, are consumed with lust and love sin. That we would apply the reasoning of this passage to all people with a homosexual

orientation, including people who love Jesus, makes a mockery of Paul's careful logic.

But what about Paul detailing the homosexual behavior of men and women as “dishonorable,” “shameless,” and “contrary to nature”? Surely we can't ignore that just because Paul is addressing the moral corruption that comes with pagan temple cults around him. Yet, Paul also describes their homosexuality as a result of “passions,” essentially unbridled lust and desire, but this is not the nature of a same-sex marriage that we seek to affirm.

Even more critical to Paul's context is that Paul identifies all this homosexual activity to initially heterosexual idolaters. In the verses prior Paul describes the heterosexual sex ceremonies these people were having, which is why he also includes the critical caveat that both these men and women either gave up or exchanged “natural relations for what is contrary to nature.” Fitting within the ancient Mediterranean worldview that often viewed homosexuality as excessive and uncontrolled sexual desire by otherwise heterosexual people, Paul essentially saw them as straight people having gay sex. Heterosexuals engaging in homosexual acts during the worship of pagan gods, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the Levitical context, has no logical bearing on same-sex relationships.

Are we then saying that Paul would have endorsed same-sex relationships? No. Paul's formative exposure to homosexuality was limited to older men engaged in sexual relationships with younger boys (i.e. pederasty), temple prostitution, and wild temple cultic orgies. Additionally, as a former Jewish Pharisee in the first century, Paul was culturally predisposed to scorn expressions of homosexuality. However, just as we excuse Paul's acceptance of slavery (Colossians 3:22) based on his ancient cultural and religious context, we should also be very careful to import his experience with expressions of first-century homosexuality into our current context of loving and monogamous same-sex relationships.

Q: In Matthew 9:3-6, Jesus affirms marriage as between one man and one woman and appeals to Genesis. Doesn't this mean then that same-sex marriage is not permitted? *“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?’ He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’”* (ESV)

Jesus is clearly not making an argument for heterosexuality. No one in the story is questioning heterosexuality. The Pharisees essentially want to know if it's morally acceptable to divorce an aging or annoying wife to find someone younger. Jesus is making a beautiful argument that we should all affirm, but that argument is for the sacredness of relational and sexual commitment within the marriage covenant. Regarding an appeal to Genesis, we can't be sure if homosexuality is a natural occurrence within the created order (like skin color) or if it is a result of the Fall. Even if homosexuality is a result of the Fall, Christians are comfortable living within a number of post-Fall realities—eating meat and wearing clothes, for example. Additionally, same-sex relationships may not fit the pre-Fall ideal, but even prior to God's pairing of Adam and Eve, God created the fundamental human need for companionship. So when Christians acknowledge the validity of same-sex relationships, we honor the good and edifying desire to share romantic intimacy that was first placed in a person's heart by the Creator Himself.

Q: Doesn't Ephesians 5:25-27 forbid same-sex marriage by making a parallel of a husband and wife to Christ and the Church? *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”* (ESV)

The bride of Christ imagery was not originally used to teach Christians about why only opposite-sex marriage is

moral, but rather about Christ's covenantal, sacrificial, and unending love for his people. Therefore, we should not be forced to choose from celebrating same-sex marriage and celebrating the future reality of Christ's eternal marriage to the Church. These are not at odds with one another. That is clearly not the implication of the text.

Same-sex marriage does nothing to undermine the bride of Christ metaphor, but rather by the covenantal nature of marriage, affirms the very essence of it. What actually undermines this is imagery is a culture of live-in relationships, divorce, and inflexible doctrines that label otherwise covenantal, sacrificial, and unending romantic commitments as sinful. It would be tragic if Christians if continued to take what God meant for encouragement, hope, and joy, and sullied the beautiful bride of Christ with anti-gay overtones.

Q: Even if Christians have misinterpreted these passages, hasn't Christianity always taught same-sex relationships are sinful? How can we reject what Christians have always taught?

Simply put, Christian teaching on homosexuality in the ancient world and the medieval era, as well as other expressions of sexuality, were not completely uniform. The claim that Christianity has always condemned same-sex relationships uses far too broad of a brush, and there is evidence to suggest uniform condemnation of same-sex unions did occur until the 13th century. Yet, this understanding need not be essential to continue our conversation. Even if one is still convinced that until recently, all Christians in all times believed all same-sex relationships were sinful, a reversal of this magnitude would not be without historic precedent.

In the sixteenth century, emerging astronomical data completely overturned the Catholic Church's consistent and biblically based teaching that the sun revolved around the earth. This, however, was not an isolated revision. That same century saw the Protestant Reformer, Jean Calvin, reject Christianity's consistent and biblically based teaching against usury. Did Calvin invalidate the theological legitimacy or legacy of his Christian predecessors? Hardly. He was merely responding to the reality that the emerging capitalist economy was changing the context of charging interest from predatory lending to a healthy feature of a free market^x. Whether it was the Catholic Church or Protestant Reformers, simply encountering new data and a new experiential context were theologically sufficient reasons for humbly revising doctrine all Christians in all times had believed until that point in history.

Q: Even if the Bible doesn't necessarily condemn same-sex marriage, isn't it true though that there is no biblical affirmation of it?

While it is true there is no explicit biblical affirmation of same-sex marriages, we should remember that the Bible does explicitly affirm in many modern day institutions or practices that Christians have no problem with. For example, the Bible does not endorse democracy, but rather monarchy. Additionally, the Bible may endorse courtship, but it certainly does not endorse dating or even pre-marital kissing. Since all marriages when the Bible was written were for the purpose of creating heirs, same-sex marriage was not on the cultural table.

Q: Is there any reason Christians should look to the Bible for affirmation of same-sex marriage?

Yes. The Bible lends implicit support for same-sex marriage in eight major ways:

1) Jesus teaches in Matthew 12:7, Matthew 7:17-20 and Mark 3:4 that biblical morality should be determined by what is merciful, good and restorative and that it should not cause unnecessary sacrifice or suffering. We acknowledge the overwhelming evidence that changing one's sexual orientation is extremely rare, and therefore we believe that to demand mandatory life-long celibacy for gays and lesbians would not be obedient to that teaching.

2) God says in Genesis 2:18, before the creation of Eve, God describes Adam's life of aloneness as "not good."

Therefore, we believe that to demand mandatory life-long celibacy for gays and lesbians would not be honoring God's foundational decree.

3) The Bible shows from passages like those in Deuteronomy 30:15, Isaiah 59:2, 1 John 1:6 and Romans 6:23 that all sin causes harm. According to the Bible, there is no such thing as a harmless sin. We cannot identify any provable spiritual, psychological or relational harm cause same-sex marriage, therefore same-sex marriage does not appear to meet the Bible's criteria for identifying sin.

4) The Bible contrasts in Galatians 5:16-23 the incompatibility of sinful behavior with the "fruit of the Spirit," that is, what a life looks like when it is led by God. This passage even makes it abundantly clear that Christians should not label anything sin if it bears the fruit of the Spirit ("against such things there is no law."). We observe that there are gay and lesbian Christians exhibiting all the fruit of the Spirit, and since this is incompatible with pervasive, unrepentant sin, we therefore conclude same-sex again marriage does not appear to meet the Bible's criteria for identifying sin.

5) The Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8,13 the attributes of what defines genuine love between people (while originally about "charitable" love, Christians have long applied it to marriage). We acknowledge that a same-sex marriage could (and has) meet all the rigorous standards set by Scripture for what defines this kind of love, therefore it appears that same-sex marriage can be spiritually edifying.

6) The Bible explains in 1 John 2:27 that the Holy Spirit teaches truth through the body of believers, and Romans 8:5-6 teaches particularly that the Spirit grants "life and peace" where the Spirit resides. Therefore, we conclude that every Christian who expresses spiritual peace about being in a same-sex relationship is not deluded into thinking that the peace is from the Holy Spirit. At least some must be genuine in order to maintain the doctrine that the Holy Spirit is a reliable expression of the Triune God.

7) The Gospel message itself has been an historical source of inspiration for human rights and the inclusion of social "outsiders." Additionally, we can recall no time when any nation embraced a civil or human rights movement, only to recant that movement in the future. We do not believe that this is the sole exception in human history, therefore we believe we are morally compelled by the Gospel to stand in support of same-sex marriage.

8) An implication of biblical doctrine of the *imago Dei* is that while cultures have always struggled to identify justice, they do correctly identify injustice. Additionally, we can recall no time when any culture collectively recognized an injustice within itself, only to decide that it was actually just in the future. In this case, we observe the moral critique and sense of injustice from the growing majority of heterosexuals in our culture about the traditionalist position on homosexuality. We do not believe that this is not the sole exception in human history, therefore we affirm that the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is still holds true in identifying the condemnation same-sex marriage as unjust.

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- ⁱ Plato, *Laws*, 840a, trans. K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p.
- ⁱⁱ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, Augsburg Press, 1998, p. 19. Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky, *The Bible Now*; Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, p 21-32. David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 131-32, 135.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, Augsburg Press, 1998, pp. 20-23.
- ^{iv} MacArthur, John; *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005, p. 1038.
- ^v Plutarch, *Moralia*, 768E, Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky, *The Bible Now*; Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, p. 34.
- ^{vi} Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, Augsburg Press, 1998, pp. 19-36.
- ^{vii} Bretlinger, Rick. "Malachi Is Never Used in the Bible to Mean Homosexual." *Gay Christian 101*. 01 November 2011. Web.
- ^{viii} Martin, Dale B. "Arsenokoites and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences" *The Center of Gay and Lesbian Studies in Religion and Ministry*, Pacific School of Religion. Web. 1996
- ^{ix} Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Book V
- ^x Achtemeier, Mark. "Beers with Dr. Achtemeier." *Monk's Kaffe Pub*. Dubuque, Iowa. Aug. 2014