

Biblical Conversation on Homosexuality

Scripture has been used to back up most anything one desires. Slavery, oppression of women, selling of daughters, bashing babies' heads on stones, multiple wives, socialism, celibacy, giving away all you have...you get the idea; all are encouraged in Scripture.

But clearly, some matters in Scripture we embrace, some we do not. Cherry picking texts and using them as weapons has done nothing more than cause division and harm. One of the main points of this process is to step out of that continuation of division and harm; to step back and acknowledge the harm that the church has caused and to make amends. That is what we are seeking to do here.

As with any difficult issue surrounding Scripture, we find ourselves asking the question of "What does the Bible say?" To answer this would cause us to actually spend some time in the Word actually looking at these passages in their larger context.

So...let's dive in.

The OT has many law-based passages that are challenging and cause us to wonder about what one passage means over and against another. It is not unusual to ask what the Bible says about marriage and how we honor parts of the Biblical understanding of marriage, yet we no longer believe that husbands can have multiple wives like Jacob. Nor do we follow the Biblical regulations about not charging interest on loans; (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25: 36-37, Deuteronomy 23:19-20). How do we interpret some Biblical regulations as applying to our society and other no longer relevant?

In dealing with biblical texts (esp OT texts), it is easy to read into or out of them what one wants to find. Therefore, different and conflicting interpretations of the texts often occur.

But what about the NT? There are only three passages in the New Testament that we can be sure specifically mention homosexuality—(although the actual word was not translated *homosexual* until recently). The passages are Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. (NRSV)

The first text is Romans 1:26-27:

For this reason God gave them [Gentiles] up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Scholars hold widely different of opinions about what Paul says here, even about the meaning of several of his Greek words seems open for debate. It is probably true that "natural intercourse for unnatural" means homosexual relationships between women, as most scholars think, although a few think the relationship is that between women and men. Paul does not specifically mention homosexuality in the list of vices that follows in Romans 1:28-32. However, he also does not mention adultery in the list. But scholars believe that the opening statement in this text gives a broader understanding "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions." Clearly this is about people not following God and acting badly, not about people in a monogamous same-sex relationship.

The second text is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

There is no question that the Greek word translated here as “sodomites” refers specifically to sexual relations between males. The single Greek word (arsenokoites) is a combination of two words: arsen, meaning “male,” and koite, meaning “marriage bed.” The label sodomite was routinely used for men that practiced sexual acts with other men that was outside of committed relationships....meaning marriage. We should further observe that “sodomites” is one kind of sinners among others. Does Paul mean that sodomites are worse sinners than the rest he mentions? *Does he not say, “None of these will inherit the kingdom of God”?*

The third text is 1 Corinthians 5:9-13:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons ... or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one Drive out the wicked person from among you.

Most of the same vices occur in both of the Corinthian passages. Are those vices more or less serious than homosexuality, which Paul does not include in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13? The Greek word translated “sexually immoral persons” is the same as that translated as “fornicators” in 1 Corinthians 6:9. It refers specifically to males, especially male prostitutes and their immoral behavior. Paul uses it and related words a number of times to mean illicit sexual behavior of any kind. Obviously, Paul thinks people having the vices mentioned are quite bad. He advises the Corinthian converts not even to eat with such people and to expel them from their community.

What, then, shall we make of all this? Is it too easy to center attention on one vice to the neglect of others that Paul thought were of equal or even greater importance?

The word translated “sodomites,” for example, occurs infrequently in Greek literature, nowhere in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), and only in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 in the New Testament. On the other hand, drinking and drunkenness, adultery and divorce are condemned much more widely in the Bible than homosexuality. I found 37 passages that condemned these other vices.

The overarching theme in the Biblical narrative is about a God that is wildly in love with the creatures He created. And seeks to have a relationship with them...all of them. In all of this we seek to create a place for everyone to know that the God that created them loves them...period.