



# The Bible and Homosexuality

*Affirming all sexual  
orientations as gifts  
from God*

By Paul Smith

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The Bible has been used to defend racism, the claim that people of color are inferior to whites and therefore, whites should be in charge. It has been used to defend sexism, the claim that women are inferior to men and therefore, men should be in charge. And now the Bible is being used to defend heterosexism, the claim that homosexuals are inferior to heterosexuals and therefore, heterosexuals should be in charge.

In this booklet I will attempt to show, as with racism and sexism, that the Bible does not support heterosexism and that all sexual orientations, including gay, straight, bisexual, and transgendered, are a gift from God to be accepted, welcomed, valued, and blessed. Since we have traditionally affirmed heterosexual orientation and its responsible expression, I will focus on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered sexuality, usually using the word "gay" to represent all of these orientations and everything in between.

The Bible is foundational for Christians, so we must wrestle with it and follow the voice of God, which we hear through it. This makes our method of understanding the Bible of crucial importance. The first task of biblical interpretation is to understand the passage as its original readers would have understood it. The chief obstacle to our hearing the original meaning is that we read our own culture and attitudes back into the passage. Since today we *never* have the same cultural background as any biblical passage, passages must be carefully explored as to their context and cultural background. The less similar the cultural situation, the more this difference must be understood.

While the Bible has been used in a public and political way to defend slavery, to oppose the freedom of women to lead and teach, and now to condemn homosexual orientation and partnership, I have come to believe that in the history of interpretation it is homosexuality which provides the most classic example of reading back current attitudes into the Bible texts.

I will attempt to answer two questions: First, does the Bible condemn all same-sex relationships? If it does not, then we may ask the second question, which is: Is there any biblical basis which would lead us to *affirm* all sexual orientations as a gift from God and to bless the responsible expression of such orientation?

## **Question One**

### **Does the Bible condemn same-sex relationships?**

Let's look at the five passages most often used in the church's debate over homosexuality to portray all same-sex sexual relationships as sinful.

### **Genesis 19:1-11: Sodom**

Two angels came to Sodom. When Lot saw them he said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night." So they entered his house. But before they lay down, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man--let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof" (Genesis 19:1-8, abbreviated).

The city of Sodom was then destroyed by God. A recent and popular understanding of this story says that it shows God's judgment on homosexual acts. There were other sins involved but it was homosexuality that God hated most. Even the word "sodomy" comes from this passage and is popularly understood to refer to homosexual acts. This understanding of Genesis 19 is a graphic example of reading something back into the story, which those closest to the story did not understand as its meaning.

The story involves the intended homosexual rape of the strangers by the men of the town, as well as intended heterosexual rape, on the part of Lot offering his daughters. However, recognizing this is different than the traditional position, which says that God destroyed Sodom *because* of homosexuality.

#### *Facts:*

1. The Old Testament refers to Sodom thirty-nine times. Not once does it refer to the sin of Sodom as sexual acts, much less homosexual acts. Rather the sin of Sodom is consistently referred to as the mistreatment of the poor and vulnerable.

This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of good, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49).

Those who were closest to this story always interpreted it to mean the mistreatment of the needy, not sexual immorality. If the story was left uninterpreted by the Bible itself, we would be freer to apply other interpretations. However this is not the case here. If we are to take the Bible seriously, the Bible's own interpretation of itself must be taken seriously.

2. Jesus refers to Sodom five times. Not once does he imply that the sin of Sodom is sexual, much less homosexual. In Luke 10, Jesus refers to the sin of Sodom as inhospitality to God's messengers, reinforcing the only Old Testament interpretation.

3. The rest of the New Testament refers to Sodom four times. Not once is the sin of Sodom referred to as homosexual acts. In Jude 7 one of the sins of Sodom is referred to as sexual immorality.

Likewise, Sodom indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust (Jude 7).

Some have mistaken the translation of "unnatural lust" (*sarkos heteros*, different, strange, other flesh) as a reference to the homosexual acts described in Romans I where the phrase "unnatural" (*para phusin*) is also used. However, the two phrases are entirely different in Greek. There is no evidence that the phrase "other flesh" (NRSV footnoted reading for *sarkos heteros*) means homosexual acts. The emphasis in the passage is on general sexual immorality (*pornoi*). There was a Jewish tradition to which the "strange flesh" phrase may allude. It was a legend that the women of Sodom had intercourse with the angels. It is significant that the Jerusalem Bible translation footnote for Jude 7 is "They lusted not after human beings, but after strangers who were angels." (Note Genesis 6:1-4). By the time of the New Testament, some Jewish teachers were beginning to interpret the sin of Sodom as sexual acts and this interpretation reached its height in the Middle Ages. However, interpreting the story as one of homosexual sin is relatively recent.

What was going on in Sodom? We must first understand that it was not unusual among ancient people to establish dominance over others or to demonstrate the final humiliation of a conquered enemy by forcing the men to "play the part of the woman" in same-sex male rape. It happens today in wartime and is a common practice in prisons for heterosexual men to gang rape another man. This is not a sexual act but rather one of violence, humiliation, and establishing power over another. It is not related to sexual orientation, as one can observe in the male prison population.

To treat a male sexually as one would treat the "inferior" female was one of the most humiliating actions one could take against another man in the ancient Mediterranean culture. The attempted gang rape of the two unwelcome male strangers was the ultimate act of inhospitality, thus following Jesus' interpretation of the sin of Sodom.

#### *Conclusion:*

Any interpretation of Genesis 19 which suggests that the "sin of Sodom" was homosexual acts can find no support in the Bible. However, let us be clear -- there was a biblical sin of Sodom. It was mistreatment of the oppressed. Those guilty of "sodomy," according to the Bible, are the very ones who discriminate against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons, some of the most rejected people of our culture! We, therefore have reached the startling conclusion, from the Bible itself, that our world, our government, and even our churches, are full of sodomites, and we must do something to change that!

### ***Leviticus 18 and 20: the Holiness Code***

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination (Lev. 18:22).

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death (Lev. 20:13).

These verses are clear -- it is wrong for a man to lie with a man and the penalty is death. What this means for us today may not be so clear when we look at other verses in the same holiness code, and ask how the laws of Leviticus apply to us.

A husband may not have sexual relations with his wife during menstruation (18:19), and if he does he is to be put out of the community (20:18).

Male and female slaves may be acquired from surrounding nations and they are the possession of one's children as an inheritance. They may be united as slaves, but one may not treat a fellow Israelite with the same harshness with which slaves are treated (25:44-46).

Anyone who curses their father or mother should be put to death (20:9).

A man who commits adultery with the wife of a neighbor should be put to death along with the woman (20:10).

Eating raw meat, planting two different kinds of seed in the same field, wearing clothes which are made from two different kinds of yam, and tattoos are all banned in Leviticus.

Touching the skin of a dead pig is condemned in Lev. 11:7. This means that playing football makes you "unclean" and prohibited from attending church!

The traditional response to these passages is to:

- (1) Cite the difference between civil, ceremonial and moral law,
- (2) Claim that the prohibition against homosexual acts is a part of the moral law,
- (3) Finally, claim that while the civil and ceremonial law have passed away, the moral law has lasting validity for Christians. After all, we would not approve of Christians going around committing incest, adultery and bestiality.

At first glance this may sound like a convincing argument, but there are two problems.

A minor problem is that there is no scholarly agreement why many of these laws were considered important to begin with. Therefore, we have no clear basis for placing each of these laws into one of the categories. Where does the prohibition of sex with a

menstruating woman go, especially since it is right in the middle of a long section dealing with what we would today call sexual morality? Is this a civil, ceremonial, or moral prohibition? Where does the prohibition against same-sex acts fit? We may speculate that the category of not mixing things could fit here as well as the prohibition of pagan temple rites. However, since we do not know the context of the homosexual prohibition, it is difficult to be clear about which category it fits in.

The major problem with this interpretation is in attempting to divide the Old Testament holiness code into three different parts. *This is an interpretation the Bible itself never makes!* It is entirely something others have invented and read back into the texts.

The separation of the law into civil, ceremonial, and moral parts is interesting, but one cannot claim the Bible itself makes such a distinction. Nowhere is any such separation made in either the Old or New Testaments. Such a division of the law into different "kinds" is not a biblical idea. It would have been unthinkable.

The law was considered seamless. One either obeyed it all, or one did not. Any reading of Leviticus shows that the Hebrew people took it all with great seriousness. One cannot pick and choose various kinds of laws as binding or not binding on us today on the basis of Leviticus itself.

By the time of Christ some Jewish scholars were making such distinctions, but we find that no New Testament writers appropriated their thinking. Paul dealt with the relationship of law and grace more than any other subject. *Not once* did he divide the law into civil, ceremonial, and moral parts. He always treated the law as one indissoluble whole.

We may find similarities between certain prohibitions we value as Christians with those in Leviticus, but we do so on the basis of an entirely new ethic which is the law of love under the guidance of the Spirit. (For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" Gal. 5:14.) We may find it reinforcing to see some of those rules in Leviticus, but we cannot get there as Christians from Leviticus itself.

Paul says in Romans 6:14 that we are "not under the law but under grace." Some have taken this to mean we are "not under the civil and ceremonial law, but we are under *grace and the moral law.*" Surely it would have been helpful for Paul to make such a distinction and many today insist on it, but Paul never says this. Furthermore, he would not say this because he didn't believe it. Paul believed that the law -- the entire law -- came to its termination in the Messiah.

Paul says in Romans 1:4 that "Christ is the end of the law." Evangelical scholar F. F. Bruce believes that the Spirit takes the place of the law in the life of the Christian. In commenting on "Christ is the end of the law," Bruce says:

The *prima facie* meaning of the statement is: now that Christ has come there is no more place for law in man's approach to God. To the thinking of many, this is a hard saying, which lies open to the charge of antinomianism [the belief that it is not important for Christians to act morally -- a charge which Paul met and rebutted in his own day] . . . It has frequently been said that, while the man in Christ is not under law as a means of salvation, he remains under it as a rule of life. . . According to Paul, the believer is *not* under law as a rule of life -- unless one thinks of the law of love, and that is a completely different kind of law, fulfilled not by obedience to a code but by the outworking of an inward power.

It is sometimes said that Christ is the end of the ceremonial law (including not only the sacrificial cultus but circumcision and the observance of the sacred calendar), but not of the moral law. Once more, . . . [this] has to be read into Paul, for it is not a distinction that Paul himself makes."<sup>1</sup>

Biblical commentator Ernst Kaseman says:

Christ terminates the Torah . . . The moral and ceremonial law form an indissoluble unity . . . Romans 8:2-4 characterizes the new life of the Christian as grounded in the act of salvation and standing in the sphere of the Spirit, in which the will of God is actually fulfilled as it could not be under the rule of the law. This does not mean (a) that the law as such is restored by the Spirit, or (b) that the law is replaced by a Christian variation of natural law."<sup>2</sup>

This is not tossing out all of the rules in Leviticus, which we as Christians have found may also be the most loving way to act. It means that it is a misuse of Leviticus to try to make any of those rules apply to Christians *because* they are a part of a moral law found in Leviticus. That is not why they apply. If any of the prohibitions of the holiness code apply, they do so only because *in Christ* we have found some of them consistent with the *law of love under the guidance of the Spirit*.

Therefore, for these reasons the holiness code of Leviticus has nothing to say in our current debate about same-sex orientation or sexual expression.

### **I Corinthians and I Timothy: man/boy and slave sex**

These passages in I Corinthians and I Timothy must be understood in the social context of the day.

Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes [*malakoi*], sodomites [*arsenkoitai*] thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers--none of these will inherit the reign of God (I Cor 6:9-10 NRSV).

Others translate these two words in italics as "boy prostitutes and practicing homosexuals" (NRSV Interlinear), "effeminate and abusers of themselves with mankind" (KJV, reflecting the view held for centuries that *arsenkoitai* meant masturbation), "homosexuals" (RSV translates both words as one in a most inaccurate translation since there was no word for "homosexual" in Greek), and "male prostitutes and homosexual offenders" (NIV).

There is much debate among Greek scholars about the meaning of these words. Gordon Fee says that one cannot be sure what *malakoi* means. *Malakos* literally means "soft ones" and may refer to young boys who had not yet developed facial or pubic hair and therefore, the younger passive partner in a pederastic relationship. The second word (*arsenkoitai*) comes from the word *arsen*, which means "male" and *koites*, which means "bed." The word literally means "one who goes to bed with a male" and Paul's use of the word is the first on record in any literature we have. It may mean the older, active partner in a man-boy sexual relationship.<sup>3</sup>

The law is laid down not for the innocent, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators [*pornoi*] practicing homosexuals [*arsenkoitai*] slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching (1 Tim 1:9-10).

Here are three related words in a row. The word "fornicators" (*pornoi*) may refer to sexual sin in general, but was often used by the Greeks to specifically refer to male prostitutes.

The second word, "practicing homosexuals" (*arsenkoitai*) may mean the active partner in a man-boy relationship, referring to those who use boys for sex.

The third word is "slave traders" and although today it may not look like a sexual word, slaves were often used for sexual purposes. These three words probably referred specifically to (1) male prostitutes, (2) those who used them, and (3) the slave-dealers who procured them.

In these passages Paul is probably condemning all three forms of pederasty: the older mentor, the prostitute, and the slave. These three forms were the only social forms of homosexual behavior openly and widely practiced in Paul's day and they involved adultery, prostitution, pedophilia, and rape. Is Paul condemning all forms of homosexual expression here? Absolutely not!

### *Similarity and Dissimilarity*

Good biblical interpretation always observes the degree of similarity and dissimilarity with our contemporary situation in a passage. The more the cultural context of a passage is similar to our situation, the more it directly applies. The less the cultural context of a passage is similar to our context, the less it directly applies. That is, in order to directly apply a biblical passage to today, the context today must be *reasonably*



similar to the context which called the biblical statements into existence.

The context of these passages is prostitution, adultery, pedophilia, and rape, all occurring within the model of pederasty (man/boy sexual intercourse). Robin Scroggs, Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, concludes after an exhaustive survey of the many texts and art work in the Greco-Roman classical era about homosexual behavior: "Pederasty was the only *model* in existence in the world of this time." The model of same-sex, monogamous, covenant partnership between equals was entirely absent in the Greek and Roman cultures at the time of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

To apply a passage meant for one context to another context that is not reasonably similar is to violate the integrity of the New Testament. These passages have nothing to say about gay sexual orientation or responsible sexual expression. Interpreting them in such a way as to apply directly to our situation today is a vivid example of reading our situation back into the biblical situation.

Paul disapproved of exactly the same kinds of sexual acts between same-sex persons as he did between different-sex persons. These passages have nothing to say about homosexual orientation or sexual expression between responsible, caring equals.

One may disapprove of same-sex relationships, but one may not do so on the basis of these two passages.

***Romans 1: pagan religious rites:***

There was one other setting for same-sex practice in Paul's day: worship rituals practiced in the popular pagan religions of Greco-Roman society. This is the context for Romans 1, the most theological passage in the Bible about *certain kinds* of same-sex sexual acts.

The over-all argument in Romans 1:18-3:20 is that every person has sinned and we all need God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. The topic of this passage is not homosexuality but God and the human situation. Romans 1:18-20 puts forth the need of all people for the grace of God, and beginning with 1:18 Paul addresses the sin of those who are not Jewish, which is their refusal to acknowledge God as God. This showed itself in the idolatry of the Gentiles and their "dirty" shameful behavior, which violated the purity code of the Jews. Idolatry in the Bible is a metaphor which often encompasses anything that takes precedence over God as our ultimate value and source of life. In this passage it also means *literal idolatry* -- worship of hand-crafted statues in pagan temples. The passage immediately preceding our two verses indicates this.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among

themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:22-25).

This is the only time this particular Greek word for "worship" is used in the New Testament. The phrase "worshiped and served the creature" in Greek refers to "worship cultically," that is, worship in a pagan temple cult.<sup>6</sup>

For this reason God gave them 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 person the due penalty for their error (Rom. 1:26-27).

### *Context*

There is no possibility of knowing what this passage meant to those to whom it was originally addressed if we do not understand the major Gentile religious practices of the day. Paul is not engaging in a philosophical discussion of worship here. Paul has in mind pagan temple worship and the very specific rites which occurred only there.

Pagan religious worship then was incredibly different from "going to church" in our day. It was vastly different from the other major religions of the world today. It involved religious prostitution, adultery, and pederasty. It also involved castration during religious sexual orgies and rites. That is why Paul says that men, and not women, "received in their own person the due penalty for their error."

### *Impurity*

It is striking that in describing the sexual activity here, as much as he disdains it, Paul uses the language of impurity (unclean, dishonorable, improper, against nature) and *not* the language of sinfulness. The traditional interpretation of this passage ignores this distinction and assumes the language of sin about the homosexual behavior.

Paul concludes his discussion in verses 28-32 by saying that God visited this "unclean" behavior (homosexual activities involved in pagan worship) on the Gentiles not only because of their sin of idolatry, but because of other sins which they practiced. Interestingly, the sins Paul then lists do not include sexual sins, but those sins which disrupted relationships. In this passage Paul clearly labels the pagan temple worship same-sex acts not as sinful, but as "unclean," using language that was sure to appeal to his Jewish readers. He carefully leads them to see that their own behavior is just as bad as the "dirty" Gentiles'. Jesus, Paul, and later the entire early church (Acts 15) decisively rejected the physical purity rules and their power to make one "unclean."<sup>7</sup>

### *Is Homosexuality Unnatural?*

Paul uses the phrase "exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural" (1:26). This has been traditionally employed to say that all homosexual activity is "unnatural." It is literally in Greek "against nature" (*para phusin*). In our language "unnatural" is a

powerful word that evokes distasteful feelings of disgust and perversion. What did this phrase mean to Paul and his readers? The phrase can be found often in the abundant moral literature of public debate about pederasty in the Greco-Roman world. This argument was not unique to Paul and he would be quite familiar with it since it was commonly argued that pederasty was "against nature." The argument was primarily based on the belief in the natural superiority of males over females. (It was always men who did the debating.) They argued that if one partner in a male homosexual relationship assumes a passive or "feminine" role then both would be debased. In the situation of two females, both would be guilty of taking the superior role reserved only for males.<sup>8</sup>

It had nothing to do with theories of natural law, which developed later, or any interpretation of the Genesis accounts of creation. "Nature" meant something that is characteristic of a certain group or species. It is "natural" or characteristic for dogs to bark, "unnatural" or uncharacteristic for humans.<sup>9</sup> Something against nature is that which is "uncharacteristic" for that group.

We can see what Paul himself meant by "nature" if we look at other places he used it. In 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 Paul says: "Does not nature (*phusis*) itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" Paul is saying that it is characteristic for women to have long hair and men to have short. That was the "natural" thing in that society. For us today in our use of the word "natural," the only natural thing about hair is that it keeps growing longer and longer on both men and women. We understand that *custom* dictates what is the characteristic, appropriate, or "natural" length.

An especially telling use of "against nature" is in Romans 11:24 where Paul uses the metaphor of grafting to describe how Christians relate to the "tree" of Judaism. Those in Christ have been grafted onto the olive tree "against nature" (*para phusin*), the same phrase Paul uses about same-sex pagan temple rites. Paul says that God letting the Gentiles relate to Christ is "unnatural" while letting the Jews relate is "natural." How can God do something "against nature" if it was bad, disgusting, evil, or against creation? The word "unnatural" in the New Testament has nothing to do with God's created order or anything intrinsically evil. "Unnatural" as Paul uses the term means something not characteristic for that group as dictated by custom or the usual way of things.

### *Conclusion*

To the degree that the contemporary practice of loving, mutual sexual expression between persons of the same-sex is not reasonably similar to the violent, promiscuous, sexual temple rites offered to pagan gods, to that degree Romans I *is not* applicable.

Romans I does not apply to the debate about homosexuality today.

## Other Arguments Against Same-Sex Unions

### ***The argument from creation***

The most recent argument against homosexual covenant partnership is the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 and 2. Some hold that the story of Adam and Eve shows that homosexual relationships are always wrong. As it is often put, "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." This is another example of reading back into the text a modern understanding of a situation.

This recent interpretation of Adam and Eve begins by reading back into Genesis a pattern of family relationships, namely, the nuclear family-- mother, father, and children. But when we look at the biblical pattern we discover a complex variety of patterns of normal family relationships in which the nuclear family as we understand it *is totally missing*. The "clan" or extended family has been the exclusive pattern of family life for every culture in recorded history until recently. The nuclear family, often referred to as the "traditional family", is of recent Western origin.

The family is under attack today. However, it is not the threat to the nuclear family today that is devastating our family life. It is the nuclear family itself which is devastating us.

One reason for the terrible instability and strain on the family today is that two parents and their children were not meant to live as an isolated unit. The biblical concept is that of the "household," which is an inherently healthier and much more a Christian model for family. The New Testament sees the church as our new "household of God." To look at the creation account and see "nuclear family" is a flagrant and even dangerous example of reading our modern culture back into the Scripture, rather than letting Scripture speak unfettered and unadulterated by our assumptions.

The family life of the Bible included many things not pictured in the story of Adam and Eve including polygamy (which was common and never condemned in the Old Testament), divorce, celibacy, childless marriages, and singleness. Genesis 1-2 makes no comment about these things.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this about the creation of Adam and Eve:

No text in Genesis (or likely the entire Bible) has been more used, interpreted, and misunderstood than this text. It has been assumed that this is a decisive text for the Bible and that it states the promise for all that follows. In fact, this is an exceedingly marginal text. No clear subsequent reference to it is made in the Old Testament. . . Even Paul does not make general appeal to this text.<sup>10</sup>

Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad says:

The story was told to answer a quite definite question. A fact needs explanation, namely, the extremely powerful drive of the sexes to each other. The recognition of this narrative as aetiological [answering a specific question about why] is theologically important.<sup>11</sup>

If the intent of this passage is to explain a natural drive, the strong sexual attraction of most persons to the other sex, then it leaves unexplained another kind of drive -- the extremely powerful drive, which a smaller number of persons experience, namely, a strong sexual attraction to the same sex.

Some today claim that Jesus' restatement of Genesis (God "made them male and female" and "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.") further strengthens the idea that the only "one flesh" union sanctioned by God is that between male and female. This is an inexcusable modern day insertion of another subject into the discussion that Jesus is having about the divorce rules in traditional marriage, the only model available for discussion. Jesus makes no comment here (or anywhere!) on homosexual "one flesh" union. To force this passage to say that homosexual union is therefore excluded from God's intention is not only bad scholarship, it is poor reasoning, and a terrible misuse of Scripture.

Paul feels free to appeal to creation in other arguments in order to make his case, but Paul never once uses Adam and Eve as an argument against homosexual acts of any kind. Why not?

It is not as if Paul is silent about all homosexual acts and we must hunt for reasons. Yet Paul, nor any other biblical writer, ever builds a case against homosexual acts using the created order as an argument.

Furthermore, *none of the biblical interpreters and teachers down through church history do so either*. It is not that Christian teachers did not speak out against homosexual acts in the past nineteen centuries, for they did so with great force, much more than the biblical writers. But among all the many arguments they summoned to show that homosexual actions were wrong, earlier scholars never once referred to Adam and Eve and the supposed "created order."

It is only in the last few years that such an argument has been brought forth. Why is this so?

I believe it was because the model of homosexuality which was present in biblical cultures and in most cultures until recently, was so far removed from the picture of Adam and Eve that it *never occurred to anyone to compare the two*. Homosexuality has been so associated with pagan worship, degenerate promiscuity, abuse, slavery, adultery, and rape, that the idea of comparing a homosexual liaison to the beautiful, intimate, caring partnership of Adam and Eve would have seemed farfetched. The

comparison would have been so far removed from any known model that it would have appeared ridiculous.

Remember that the model of a loving same-sex partnership between equals simply did not exist in any visible way in either the Old or New Testament culture. The "homosexual lifestyle" or "practicing homosexual" has previously only meant wild promiscuity. It is only in the last few years that gays and lesbians have become visible in terms of faithful relationships. This new picture of homosexuality as a lifestyle of responsible partnership presents the first time in history we have had the possibility of thinking of homosexuality as comparable in any sense to the partnership, respect, equality and love hopefully expressed in heterosexual marriage.

God created more than Adam and Eve and we must learn from all of God's creation. Bruce Bagemihl is the author of the 751-page book, *Biological Exuberance, Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*. He says:

Homosexual behavior occurs in more than 450 kinds of animals worldwide, and is found in every major geographic region and every major animal group. The world is indeed teeming with homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered creatures of every stripe and feather. It is no longer possible to attribute the diversity of human sexual expression solely to the influence of culture or history since such diversity may in fact be part of our biological endowment, an inherent capacity for 'sexual plasticity' that is shared with many other species.

We shall discuss creation more later, but regardless of how heterosexuality and homosexuality are shaped, the creation fact is that both exist now and as far as we know, have existed for as long as animals and humans have existed. Given this presence of gays throughout creation history, it is important to say that God *did* create Adam and Steve and wants to bless them just like Adam and Eve.

***The argument that heterosexual partnership is the only model supported consistently throughout the Bible***

It is true that heterosexual sexual relationships are the only model of sexual intimacy assumed and prescribed throughout the Bible. Slavery and patriarchy are also assumed as appropriate models consistently throughout the Bible. Most Christians have rejected slavery and many have rejected the idea that men should be in charge of women. To claim that biblical culture only portrays one kind of sexual relationship is an argument from biblical culture, not biblical principles. See below for further comment.

***The argument that homosexuality is always condemned in the Bible***

It is true that every time the Bible speaks about homosexual acts, it condemns them, without exception. The traditional position concludes that therefore all homosexual relationships must be wrong. The premise is true, the conclusion is not.

The true premise is that in every instance (except for Sodom where there is no specific comment) where the Bible speaks of same-sex acts, they are always condemned. The conclusion that therefore, all homosexual acts are wrong contains two flaws.

The first flaw in this argument is that if committed, monogamous relationships were not a visible model in that society, then they were not up for either approval or condemnation. This means we don't know for sure what Paul would have specifically said about them. He may have condemned them, he may not. Personally, I believe he would have supported them, but I cannot say that on the basis of any direct evidence from any of Paul's statements about homosexuality.

However, the fatal flaw in the argument of "no exceptions to the Bible's disapproval of same-sex acts" can most easily be seen in the debate about slavery from previous generations. The Bible approves of slavery. *There are absolutely no exceptions to that approval.*

Consider these facts about slavery and the Bible: The Old Testament never opposes slavery but merely regulates it. Four times, Paul tells slaves to obey their masters. Never once does any writer of the New Testament condemn the system of slavery or tell Christians to free their slaves. There is no place anywhere in Scripture that disapproves of slavery. Slavery is even used as a metaphor of our relationship with God. These are the same reasons used by some a hundred and fifty years ago in attempting to give a biblical basis for maintaining the slave system.

The abolitionists appealed to the wider and more basic themes of justice, mercy, and love to press their case. The abolitionists appeared to many Christians to have the weaker case. Those who favor abolition of discrimination against homosexuals appear to some today to have the weaker case also. I believe this is because it requires more effort to discern God's intent in applying the foundational themes of love and justice to situations today than to simplistically apply ancient biblical cultural practices, which we have given divine status.

This biblical example of slavery is so strong for those with a more traditional interpretive method that I know one Christian leader who believes there is nothing wrong with slavery. This is an incredible misuse of Scripture. I believe God's liberating word in and through the Bible planted the seeds that have resulted in every civilized nation on earth outlawing slavery.

Most Christians today believe that the New Testament itself laid the groundwork for the eventual liberation of persons from institutionalized slavery. *It is exactly the same interpretive method that leads me to say the Bible plants the seeds for the liberation of homosexual persons from religious persecution and for the blessing of gay unions.*

### *Conclusion*

We may fairly conclude that the Bible always condemns the homosexual acts with which the writers are familiar: sex between the powerful and the powerless such as with

slaves and man/boy sex (pederasty), prostitution, rape, pagan temple rites, and adultery. These are the same acts which the Bible also condemns in heterosexual form.

The Bible makes no direct comment on gay sexual orientation or responsible same-sex sexual expression. Does the Bible condemn same-sex sexual orientation or responsible expression? No, it does not.

## **Question Two**

### **Does the Bible lead us to affirm homosexuality in the same way we affirm heterosexuality?**

We have explored what the Bible says and does not say about homosexual behavior. What does the Bible say about sexuality in a larger perspective? Is there any positive biblical basis that might lead us to affirm the sexual orientation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons? There are eleven teachings in the Bible which point us to this.

#### **1. Sex is God's Idea.**

Male and female God created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply." God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen. 1:27-28, 31).

Sex was created by God, not by our sinfulness. Sex is called good -- very good. In the next chapter, Genesis reports they were "naked and not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25). God did not command them to be that way. That's just the way they were created -- joyfully sexual.

The picture of sexual union is further elevated in the rest of the Bible. The same word, "to know," is used for both sexual intercourse and our relationship with God. It is the most important biblical image of God's faithfulness with us. The Songs of Songs is not first a theological treatise, but an erotic love poem. Our sexuality is not a minor or irrelevant part of our selves. It is a part of the very core of our being, whether we are heterosexual or homosexual.

There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that same-sex orientation has not been created by God just as different sex orientation has been created by God. Everywhere we look in nature we can see that God celebrates the richness of diversity in the creation. There is an infinite variety in natural creation and that includes sexual orientation.

The Psalmist repeatedly tells of the look to creation to see God's hand. When we look at sexual creation we can be informed by the creation of not only gay and straight, but many blends of these, including bisexual.



What is God saying in the existence throughout recorded history of these sexual differences, not only in humans but in the animal realm as well? This is what I believe I have heard God say:

"I am the author of creativity. So do not be so surprised when I myself am creative. Do not limit my handiwork. I have created not only male and female, but gay and straight, and all in between. What I have called "good" you should not call "bad." Do not call my creation a curse. My creation is always a gift. If you do not see this you will live in the judgment of your own blindness and under the curse you yourself have proclaimed."

These are strong words, but I believe they are the word of the Lord for today.

## **2. It is not good for us to be alone**

"It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

There is a universal need for companionship, which includes the possibility of relational and sexual intimacy. This need is the same, whatever our sexual orientation.

If this need is not met in an adequate fashion then quite often our life and ministry suffers. Those persons, with the exception of those few with the gift of celibacy, who are in a nurturing life-sustaining relationship that includes emotional, physical, and spiritual nurturing, and intimacy are not only able to better live, but also better able to minister and give the world love. It is truly not good for man or woman, gay or non-gay, to be alone.

Those who would deny that God has said it is not good for a person to be alone will have to answer for their denial of God's word and the subsequent loneliness and evil such denial creates.

## **3. The theme of justice in the Old Testament**

A powerful call to justice is issued by the prophets throughout the Old Testament. Our idea of justice is that we should treat all people fairly and impartially. The biblical idea of justice is that we should never be impartial, but should always take the side of those who are marginalized by society.

The prophets' repeated identification of unjust and inhospitable treatment of the stranger as the sin of Sodom is a pointed indictment of the way many Christians treat homosexual Christians. It is incredible that we have totally turned around a story about the sin of not welcoming the vulnerable and used it as a basis to mistreat the strangers at our churches -- gay and lesbian Christians.

## **4. The eunuch, an excluded sexual minority**

The eunuch was an identifiable, persecuted, and excluded sexual minority in the Bible. Eunuchs were excluded from the worshiping community of Israel, simply on the basis of

birth or the actions of others, which created their sexual status. The eunuch could not participate in traditional marriage and was looked down upon by the people of God.

The situation of the eunuch is strikingly similar to that of the homosexual persons' today. The kinds of culturally generated negative and oppressive feelings and religious exclusion eunuchs faced are exactly the kinds of feelings and restrictions homosexual persons face today. Like the eunuch of the Bible, homosexual persons are an identifiable, persecuted, church-excluded group because of their sexuality. They, too, have been prohibited from participating in the kind of marriage which is natural for them, and are looked down upon by the people of God.

Isaiah saw the injustice of such treatment. He issues a striking prophetic pronouncement, the only one in the entire Old Testament, which reverses a previous Levitical law. Will the church listen to one of its biblical prophets as he thunders down God's promise for all the sexual disenfranchised? Hear what he says:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,

"The Lord will surely separate me from God's people";  
and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree."

For thus says the Lord: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (Isaiah 55:3-5)

I believe this promise is fulfilled every time a church gives gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons a full and blessed place within its walls.

## **5. The Incarnation**

The most cosmic statement in all of history about our sexuality is this:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14).

God became flesh. Not just amorphous, androgynous, sexless flesh -- but sexual flesh and, specifically, male sexual flesh, complete with body parts, testosterone, and erotic feelings.<sup>13</sup> This means that Jesus had adolescent sexual feelings, erections, nocturnal emissions, sexual attractions, and the earthy Jewish appreciation of sexuality. Sounds like, real flesh to me!

John the Baptist proclaimed the words of Isaiah that "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." All flesh -- skin, bones, muscles, warts, cellulite, small and large breasts, genitals, and that fat belly! All flesh will be touched by the shattering love of God!

Yet in the early church there rapidly developed an attitude that sexuality was a concession, a weakness in life. Celibacy became the highest sexual value and Christianity became identified with a negative attitude towards sex. In Christian literature down through history there has been little thankfulness and joy for sex. It has mostly been seen as a curse and a dangerous burden to be carried and feared. These powerful and largely unconscious assumptions persist in our culture today and make dialogue about sexual issues difficult at best.

Before we can lovingly consider how to respond to homosexual persons, perhaps we will need to find ways to more lovingly consider heterosexual persons, to free them from the powerful shame that binds them. Then we can stop projecting shame onto others, homosexual or heterosexual.

### **6. Jesus' justice and mercy**

Echoing Micah 6:8, Jesus blasted the Pharisees with, "you have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith." (Matt. 23:23). The heroes of his stories were the outcast and rejected.

The basis of judgment, according to the parable of the sheep and goats, is not proper belief but how we treat the outcast. Surely homosexual persons are among the most persecuted and rejected persons in our society.

The story of Jesus healing the centurion's "slave" is one of the many stories that shows Jesus' mercy and justice at work. The slave is referred to as the centurion's "boy" (Luke 7:7) and one who was "dear to him" (7:2). "Boy" was the common term for the homosexual lover that Roman soldiers often lived with.<sup>14</sup> Jesus would have certainly been quite aware of this as he praised this soldier and exclaimed, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith," and then healed the soldier's gay lover!

### **7. The ministry of the Holy Spirit**

Jesus said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12-13).

This teaching of teaching cannot be used to approve of just any doctrine or practice, but Jesus did mean *something* by it. We may not take what he intended seriously when we say such things as, "But the church has never done this before." or "I can't find that statement in the Bible." I believe one of the new things the Spirit is teaching us is to call both gays and non-gays to the same privileges and responsibilities.

### **8. Acts 15: Inclusivity tested**

We see the early church taking this previous statement of Jesus in John 16 very seriously when they were confronted with changing a deeply held, emotionally loaded, religiously based tradition and moving to the dramatic new belief that one can be acceptable to God without observing Jewish religious laws and customs. This is similar to the kind of change I believe God is asking of us around affirming gays and their partnerships today.

The Jerusalem conference recorded in Acts 15 gives us an insightful and bold precedent in how God moves us to dramatic new paradigms. (See my book *Is It Okay to Call God "Mother," Considering the Feminine Face of God*, Hendrickson Publishers, chapters eight and nine, for a full treatment of the Jerusalem conference and eight principles it demonstrates for managing innovation with care under the Spirit's leading.)

The dispute in Acts 15 was about the insistence of some early Christians that the new Gentile converts to Christianity also become Jews and observe Jewish laws and customs. The question was not settled by quoting Old Testament proof texts, logical reasoning, majority vote, words of prophecy, or apostolic command. It was ultimately resolved by *experience*, by observing what the Holy Spirit was doing in their midst

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as God did to us (Acts 15:8).

The observable experience of the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit without having to conform to Jewish laws was the ultimate evidence that resolved the problem. The Gentiles were okay as they were and did not need to adopt traditional Jewish practices, becoming and acting like Jews.

An increasing number of us see God's Spirit filling and blessing same-sex individuals and relationships today. If we are to use biblical precedent for making monumental changes, then this is strong evidence indeed.

Gays are okay as they are and do not need to be changed, "cured," or act like heterosexuals!

### **9. Paul, the realist**

In the New Testament we see a new sexual principle in the light of the reign of God. Going beyond the Jewish ideal that everyone should be married and have many children, the New Testament offers the idea of singleness as a chosen vocation for the sake of ministry. Paul holds up the idea of singleness as a good model for all, but he cast no dispersions on marriage. More pointedly, he is very realistic about sexual drives. The new ethic of singleness valued is tempered by reality. Paul says:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.  
(1 Cor. 7:8-9, underlining mine)

Notice the assumptions Paul makes in this important passage.

(1) Not every unmarried person can practice self-control. He does not say the answer for the unmarried is simply to control themselves. "Just control yourself" is what we say to single, heterosexual Christians and homosexual Christians, but there is a difference. The single heterosexual Christian can find church support and blessing for finding a life-

partner. The homosexual Christian will traditionally not only not be supported, but will be condemned if he or she finds a partner that is natural for them, namely of the same-sex.

(2) Paul assumes the answer to a lack of self-control is marriage, but do we assume that for homosexual Christians? No! We assume what Paul was not willing to assume, that everyone who is unmarried can practice self-control. Paul's statements are directed at heterosexual single persons since the category of "homosexual" did not exist at that time, nor did the model of same-sex marriage. I believe that Paul, a wise realist, would have included homosexual persons in his advice to find a partner if he had been aware of this orientation.

(3) Paul did not assume that every unmarried person had the capacity to be celibate. Yet traditionally, we assume that gay and lesbian Christians do have this capacity. This seems to me to be religious abuse of the highest sort, plunging many gay and lesbian Christians into terrible despondency. The suicide rate among gay teenagers is three times that of heterosexual teens.

(4) Paul assumes that some of those who do not marry and cannot practice self-control will be "aflame with passion." He considers this state unsatisfactory. We say, "Take cold showers." Paul says, "Get a partner."

Paul's advice is also an answer for gay men and lesbian women and realistically points to the support and blessing of gay unions in the church.

### **10. Paul addresses those who forbid marriage for religious reasons:**

Now the spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith. . . They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving . . . For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving (I Tim 4:1-4).

Unaware of homosexual orientation and healthy same-sex love, Paul specifies that it is traditional marriage, different-sex covenant partnership, which should not be denied to any Christian. Since homosexuality is the naturally occurring ability to fall in love with someone of the same sex, then that too is part of what is "created by God and nothing is to be rejected." The church must stop forbidding gay unions if we are to take Paul seriously.

### **11. Love is the goal of all things**

There is only one ethical standard that Jesus held up as the single guideline we could always count on. There was only one moral motivation that Paul returned to constantly. This is the ethic of love.

The love principle is the one simple factor which pulls everything together. However, since many situations are neither covered nor imagined in the New Testament era, the

Holy Spirit was given to us so that we might apply the ethic of love to every situation in every generation in harmony with God's desires.

Theologian Daniel Williams says that the basis for judging any sexual practice is "what the practice in question does to the creation of loving, mutually supporting persons who can grow in love to God and the neighbor, but who also have tendencies to exploit one another, and who must find disciplines of self-protection and self-restraint for the sake of love."<sup>15</sup> The love question is, "Will this act help give and receive more love?"

Human sexuality is intended to be union of eros and agape, a union of sex and love, of eroticism and self-giving. Sex without love tends to be exploitive, abusive and fragmented. Sex must transcend itself to become love.<sup>16</sup> Sexual love must discover its own joys and its own limitations.

Judgment on a Christian sexual lifestyle is the test of agape love: what it means for us, our partner, the Christianity community, and the human community. Does it make us kinder, more patient, more open to change and growth, and more compassionate for all human beings?

I have seen the love of same-sex couples and found it often to be filled with even more love and compassion than I have found, in general, with different-sex couples.

*How do these eleven biblical principles apply to gay and lesbian persons?*

They apply to gay and lesbian persons in the same way they do to heterosexual persons. I have no biblical mandate to think otherwise.

### *FINAL CONCLUSION*

I believe that if one draws a straight line from the Bible to now, the inevitable conclusion is that all sexual orientations are a gift from God. Homosexuality, the natural ability to fall in love with a person of the same sex is a gift from God. God blesses same-sex relationships in the same way that God blesses different-sex relationships.

We must change both the internal and external messages of hate which attempt to use the Bible against homosexual persons. One friend of mine has been redeemed by God's love from self-hate about his sexual orientation and his capacity to fall in love with another man. He and his same-sex partner have been together for over twenty years now and have developed such care for one another that the love these two men share is a model of covenant love for all. I like what he said when asked if he was a "practicing homosexual." He responded, "I'm way past the practicing stage, I'm getting pretty good at it!"

<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul. Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 191-193.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Kaseman, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Fee *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 243.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 139.

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that it did not exist at all, but that it was not generally talked about or in the public awareness. For instance child abuse has a totally new public awareness in our public and literary consciousness. Our former lack of awareness does not mean it did not exist in previous generations.

<sup>6</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 173.

<sup>7</sup> For those not familiar with the distinction between sin language and purity language, see L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex* (Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, What Does Scripture Say? in *Open Hands*, Summer 1993, 5.

<sup>9</sup> H. Darrell Lance, The Bible and Homosexuality, *American Baptist Quarterly*, Jan 1989, 148.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta., John Knox, 1982) 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, a commentary* (London: SCM, 1972) 84-85.

<sup>12</sup> An argument often brought forth at this point and associated with 'creation' is the one of "But the parts don't fit." Since this is, first of all, not an argument from the Bible itself I will only address it as a side-issue. This argument says that the penis and vagina are the only "natural" or "creation intended" way for sexual union and pleasure to take place. The roots of this argument are in the ancient Roman Catholic doctrine that sexual relationship should be only for the purposes of procreation. Most Catholics no longer hold to that, but the remnants are still around. What is obvious is that the parts fit in lots of ways! Both opposite and same-sex couples participate in sexual relationships that involve oral and anal sex as well as masturbation. If we think it is okay for opposite-sex partners to enjoy a sexual relationship in a variety of ways, then we should believe that also for same-sex partners. To suggest differently reveals a prejudice against gay sex under the guise of pseudo-biology, rather than how the sexual functions are performed. Furthermore, the constant focusing of homosexual unions on genital activity is a common, but serious distortion. Gay and lesbian unions mean much more than body parts, just like straight couples. It involves persons, emotions, and spiritual connections that go far beyond the physical. If our theology is to be biblical, it must come from the Bible, not our assumptions about body parts.

<sup>13</sup> Because Jesus represented the transition from the Old Testament priest to the priesthood of all and also symbolized the unblemished male sacrificial lamb, Jesus had to be a male. In addition only a male could have had the freedom to teach and the freedom to model servanthood in a counter-cultural way.

<sup>14</sup> K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press) 16.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel D. Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (Lanham, Md., University Press of America, 1981) 218. Much of my section here relies on Williams' chapter on Love and Sexuality.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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