

The Bible and Equality for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People

We must take our Holy Book seriously – especially when using it to justify behavior towards other people. Is it a book that discusses God working through those we least expect, those not treated equality in society? Or is it one that goes along with our social norms. In the words of Anne Lamont, quoting her Priest friend Tom, “you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” (Bird by Bird) Thus, who does the Bible call us to love, and does the Bible call us to condemn any person who is living into the being they were created to be?

In addition, when the Bible discusses homosexuality, it is not discussing homosexuality as we understand it today, translating anything in the Bible as “homosexuality” is placing a modern meaning of a text onto a source in antiquity. The homosexuality that was in the public sphere during Biblical times was often sexually exploitive of young males. Additionally, it was focused on male gender roles – even conservative scholars have admitted that nowhere in the Bible are female-female relationships condemned in Scripture.

A brief discussion of verses usually used to condemn LGBT people follow. Please see additional resources for further discussions of these verses.

The Story of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-14)

The “sin” of Sodom according to many scholars, is not homosexuality, but lack of hospitality to strangers. When this verse is discussed in Ezekiel 16:48-9 it notes, “As I live, says the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Nowhere is homosexuality discussed in speaking of the sin of the Sodomites.

The Holiness Codes – Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

Included within the holiness codes in these verses are many rules we no longer follow today including the regulations that it is unlawful to plant various types of crops in one field (Leviticus 19:19), those with physical disabilities cannot approach the altar of the Lord (Leviticus 21:18-20), adulterers should be put to death (Leviticus 20:10). Also included within Leviticus are chapters dedicated to discussions of animal sacrifices, something we no longer do in our UMC churches today.

Thus, we must approach these verses within the cultural boundaries in which they existed. Additionally, as we shared above, the homosexuality mentioned in the Bible, is not about the loving, committed relationships that are now a part of our society. Scholars, like Rev. Dr. Mel White argue that, male-male sexual activity and masturbation were an abomination, “because the Hebrew pre-scientific understanding was that the male semen contained the whole of life. Therefore, the spilling of semen without possibility of having a child was considered murder.”¹

¹ Mel White, *Soulforce: What the Bible Says {and Doesn't Say} about Homosexuality* (Lynchburg, VA), p. 12.

Natural vs. Unnatural - Romans 1:26-7

In this passage we see a conversation between “natural” and “unnatural” behavior. In the time the passage was written there was no understanding of sexual orientation. The authors assumed that those who were engaging in same-sex sexual relations were giving up their God-given gift of sexual attraction to someone of the other gender. Additionally, many scholars agree that what is being described in these passages is pederasty (where an older adult male seeks sexual gratification from a younger boy).

1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Timothy 1:10

These passages translate *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* “homosexuality,” assuming that is what Paul meant in his writing, however this is a word that Paul created, so its meaning is hotly debated. According to Rev. White, the meaning of *arsenokoitai*, was not translated “homosexuals” until 1958. Dale Martin argues that the interpretation of Corinthians and Timothy to express disapproval of “homosexuality” is based more upon people’s desires to “marginaliz[e] gay and lesbian people” and much less to do with historical justification.

In other places in Scripture (Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25) where *malakos* appears it is translated “soft things,” which does not relate to LGBT relationships. According to Dale Martin, in other writings outside scripture where *arsenokoitai* appears, it is within lists of economic sins, as in the *Sibylline Oracle* and the *Acts of John*,² and thus does not relate in any way to homosexuality. According to David L. Tiede the setting of 1 Corinthians 6:9, where Paul is working to correct the Corinthian community, shows that the list focuses on, “abusive acts and perverted relationships,” and should not be read as a ban on all same-sex activities or orientations.³ Thus, we must take a hard look at scripture to ensure that our translations stand the test of time and academic scrutiny.

Conclusion

In the words of Marvin M. Ellison, we are called as Christians to “not [just] tolerance, inclusion or even acceptance...but powerful *transformation*, a dismantling of hierarchical social power and of the patriarchal conceptual framework that legitimizes gender and sexual oppression.”⁴ We need to look at our Scriptures as God’s words of love and justice to God’s people – are they meant to liberate people from oppression or create barriers to God’s vision for this world? These are questions we must consider and not take lightly the impact they have on God’s people.

² Dale Martin, “*Arenokoitês and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences*,” in Robert J. Brawley’s, Ed., *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 120.

³ David L. Tiede, “Will Idolaters, Sodomizers, Or the Greedy Inherit the Kingdom of God : A Pastoral Exposition of 1 Cor 6:9-10.” *Word & World* 10.2 (1990): p. 150.

⁴ Marvin M. Ellison, “Practicing Safer Spirituality: Changing the Subject and Focusing on Justice,” in M. De La Torre, ed., *Out of the Shadows into the Light: Christianity and Homosexuality* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009), p. 7.