

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

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Holy God,
In your creation you declared all,
each and everyone
each and everything
to be good.
May we listen well
and attend to what
you declare
to be good
this day, at this time.
In this world of so many
names, faces, places, spaces,
may we remember that
there is room enough
there is love enough
for all, each and everyone
each and everything.
AMEN

I want to start off with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Now that's a big, impressive-sounding seminary term for the different sources we use in forming our religious beliefs: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

Scripture is the primary authority of religious truth. And the other three are lenses we look through to inform our interpretation and understanding of scripture.

Tradition shows us how, beginning with the early church, faithful people have taken biblical teachings and translated them into creeds and practices which have been handed down through the generations.

We use our God-given minds to *reason* and think rationally in interpreting the bible and figuring out what we believe and why.

And we use our personal *experience* of how we have come to know God in our own life in forming our religious beliefs.

Even though the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is named after John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the Protestant tradition as a whole uses this framework for discerning who God is, how God is revealed to us, and what God does in the world.

As we journey through this Open and Affirming process, an important question is “What does the Bible say?” It is important because our Protestant heritage compels us to view scripture as a central source of the revelation of God. The Bible is the Word of God, but God is not trapped on its pages. God is alive in our hearts and minds and experience today, just as God has been in the past and will be forevermore.

As Christians, and as members of the United Church of Christ, we believe the Bible is the Word of God. And through the generations since the Bible was first codified, we have believed that God continues to speak to the community of faithful believers through Scripture – that it is not just the Word of God, but very much the *living, breathing, dynamic* Word of God.

Almost four hundred years ago, when the Pilgrims – our Congregational forebears – prepared to leave Europe for the New World, their pastor in Holland, John Robinson, urged them to keep their hearts and minds open to new ways and new interpretations of the Holy Scriptures with these words: “The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word.” And our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is still urging us to keep open hearts and open minds with the words “God is still speaking.”

Although our faith tradition does not require us to read the Bible as the inerrant, infallible word of God, we do take the Bible seriously, and because we take it seriously, we try to study it for its true meaning rather than simply look for verses to support what we already believe. To be authoritative in any real sense of the word, the Bible must be interpreted from a humble perspective that allows Scripture to inform and transform us rather than our picking and choosing out of context those passages which seem to support opinions and beliefs we have already formed.¹

The 66 books of the Bible were written by men living in a particular time, place, and culture, and they express at times quite contradictory understandings of our relationship with God and God’s will for our lives. We cannot simply pick and choose what we like or what seems to support our particular point of view. The Bible is not a clear-cut black-and-white rulebook for living; instead, the scriptures are complex and nuanced and need to be studied, reflected upon, wrestled with, interpreted, and understood in light of our own context and experience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Every reference in the Bible to sexual relations between same-sex partners is negative. Such relations are condemned as “unnatural” and “shameless” acts that result from “degrading passions.” Accordingly, many Christians believe the will of God regarding such matters is obvious. They believe that Scripture presents homosexual acts as sinful and that, accordingly, the Church should not bless or sanction homosexual behavior.

It is at best simplistic and at worst unfaithful and unChristian to cull out certain verses in the Bible and decide that they definitively declare homosexuality is “sinful,” or “unnatural,” or “shameless,” declaring that the will of God is obvious. At the time the bible was written, the concept of “sexual orientation” was unknown; thus, some scholars believe the biblical passages often quoted as condemning homosexual behavior actually denounce homosexual acts performed by heterosexual people. Others believe that only specific instances of homosexual activity are condemned, such as prostitution, promiscuity, or sex with minors. Many Christians notice that no biblical text ever specifically comments on the morality of sexual relations between two men or two women who are in a loving relationship characterized by lifelong commitment.

Genesis 1

Let's start "In the Beginning..." You may have heard protesters say: "It's about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

The creation story is primarily about God, a story written to show the power of God who created the world and everything in it. It teaches us that ultimately God is our Creator, that God shaped us, and that God said, "It's good." I particularly like the New International Version's translation of this passage: (Ch 2) “¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.” And (Ch 1) “³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

Now what does the creation story say about homosexuality? Because the text says that God created humans male and female and “blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number...” some people think this means gay or lesbian couples are not blessed by God or, worse, are “unnatural” and go against “God’s law.” They read this interpretation into the text, even though the text is silent about all kinds of relationships that don't lead to having children: couples who are unable to have children; couples who are too old to have children; couples who choose not to have children; people who are single. As Christians and as a society, we do not view childlessness as an immoral failure to fulfill God’s will. Even in the Bible, some couples [Chilion and Orpah; Mahlon and Ruth] never produce children [Ruth 1:1-5]. Such childlessness may be regarded as unfortunate, but the childless couple is not viewed as sinful or wrong for not having kept God’s commandment.²

In short, there's nothing in Genesis that condemns or approves the love that people of the same sex have for each other. So while the creation story says a lot about God's power and presence in the universe, it says nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

Let’s now look at the “big seven” biblical passages which mention sexual relationship between persons of the same sex. Because of their similarities, I will discuss these seven texts in four groups.

Genesis 19:1-9 and Judges 19:22-25

Two stories found in Genesis and Judges relate horrific tales of men who want to rape male visitors to their cities. In the Genesis account, angels disguised as men visit Abraham's nephew Lot in the city of Sodom, and a gang of violent men converges upon the residence with this intent. In the story found in Judges, a similar gang tries to assault a traveling Levite spending the night in the village of Gilbeah.

It was common for soldiers, thieves, and bullies to rape a fallen enemy, asserting their victory by dehumanizing and demeaning the vanquished. This act of raping an enemy is about power and revenge, not about homosexuality or homosexual orientation.

The stories speak only of the sin of homosexual rape – emphasis on the word “rape” -- and say nothing at all about consensual relationship between persons of the same sex.

The story in Genesis is later referred to in Jude 7, where the writer accuses the inhabitants of Sodom of being guilty of “sexual immorality” and of “going after other flesh” but, again, these descriptions probably refer only to the perverse character of abusive sex rather than to same-sex relationship in general; in other biblical passages, the Sodomites are castigated for failing to show justice to the poor and needy [Ezekiel 16:49-50; Isaiah 1:10-17; 3:9-15]. Jesus and several Old Testament prophets all speak of the sins that led to the destruction of Sodom -- and not one of them mentions homosexuality. Even Billy Graham doesn't mention homosexuality when he preaches on Sodom.

Listen to what Ezekiel 16:48-49 tell us: "This is the sin of Sodom; she and her suburbs had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not help or encourage the poor and needy. They were arrogant and this was abominable in God's eyes."

Whatever teaching about sexuality people might get out of this passage, it is important to hear this central, primary truth about God as well. God has called us do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our Creator. Sodom was destroyed because its people didn't take God seriously about caring for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, or the outcast.

But the story of Sodom says nothing about homosexual orientation as we understand it today. Thus, the stories in Genesis and in Judges have little relevance for matters that we are currently discussing.

Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13

In two passages the Bible specifically prohibits sexual intercourse between male partners:

Leviticus 18:22 -- You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13 -- If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them.

These prohibitions seems unqualified and absolute. Some scholars have suggested that the restrictions were intended to prohibit participation in pagan fertility rites or to prohibit the sexual abuse that men might inflict on slaves, prisoners, or children.

Both passages are part of what is usually called the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26), a block of material written 3000 years ago describing how the nation of Israel is to remain pure before God. This code includes prohibitions against round haircuts, tattoos, working on the Sabbath, wearing garments of mixed fabrics, eating pork or shellfish, getting your fortune told, and even playing with the skin of a pig. (There goes football!)

From a literalist, fundamentalist, perspective these verses look pretty straight-forward, but is interpreting them really that simple? If these verses are simply referring to gay males, it should be interesting to note that God forgot about lesbians. Are we to infer that sex between women is OK? It's likely the very people who use these verses against homosexuals would have a problem with that conclusion. Even for those who aren't biblical scholars, this should be an initial clue that maybe this law is not simply about homosexual people after all.

Another important consideration is that most Christians do not apply commands in Leviticus to their lives. We believe these laws are not binding on Christians. We do not believe we are under obligation to perform ritual hand washing, to refrain from eating pork or to abstain from sex during a woman's period.

The Christian Church has consistently taught that the Holiness Code is not determinative for Christian behavior or ethics. Many of the prohibitions (for example, against wearing clothing made from two types of material, or against planting two types of crops in a single field) may strike Christians as irrelevant, while others (against adultery, incest, and child sacrifice) reflect values still embraced within the Christian Church.

Christian churches do not make much of an attempt to apply the commands in Leviticus to corporate life. The requirements in Leviticus was that no priest serve the Lord, unless he was physically perfect. That is no longer the case. Pastors and priests are not required to marry virgins, as commanded in Leviticus 21:13. Churches do not check potential pastors for blemishes, eye defects, physical disabilities and inspect a potential pastor's testicles to ensure they are perfect before the pastor is hired (requirement in Leviticus 21:16 to 21).

For Christians who feel that Christ's sacrifice on the cross wipes away the need to keep the laws in Leviticus, enforcing Levitical laws on homosexuals is grossly inconsistent theology and certainly flies in the face of the one law that Jesus proclaimed was the most important. Jesus interpreted the overall intent for us by telling us in Matthew 22:39-40 that God's overriding grand intention for the laws was given in: Deuteronomy 6:5 -- "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" and in Leviticus 19:18 -- "[Do

not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but] love your neighbor as yourself.

Moreover, Jesus was constantly breaking the Levitical laws; that's why the Scribes and Pharisees often criticized him for eating with "tax collectors and sinners," people who were ritually impure. But Jesus chastised the Scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, accusing them of following the letter of the law but not its spirit.³

Jesus and Paul both said the holiness code in Leviticus does not pertain to Christian believers. Nevertheless, there are still people who pull the two verses about men sleeping together from this ancient holiness code to say that the Bible seems to condemn homosexuality.⁴

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

In two New Testament passages, the apostle Paul lists some of the type of people he regards as sinful: "fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers [1 Cor 6:9-10 – New Revised Standard Version]; "murders, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers...[1 Tim 1:9-10 -- NRSV].

The Greek word translated as "male prostitutes" in the NRSV is *malakoi*; the Greek word translated as "sodomites" in the NRSV is *arsenokoitai*.

No one knows precisely what the Greek words mean, but they do seem to refer to men who engage in sex acts with other men. The word *malakoi* means "soft ones" and may be used here as meaning "effeminate."

The word *arsenokoitai* is extremely rare; in fact, it is found nowhere except in these two verses of Scripture. The word is a compound term from the Greek words for "male" (*arsen*) and "bed" (*koitai*), such that the resultant word ("male-bedder") could be a slang term for a man who "bed" (i.e., has sex with) another man. In 1958, this Greek word was – for the first time – translated into English as *homosexuals*, even though there is, in fact, no such word in Greek or Hebrew.

As Walter Wink points out in his article "Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality," it is not clear whether these two passages refer to the "passive" and "active" partners in homosexual relationships, or to homosexual and heterosexual male prostitutes. We must be careful not to base moral teaching on an unsure interpretation of Scripture, and not to allow these verses to carry more interpretative weight than they can bear.

In short, it is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone, or promiscuity and "sex-for-hire," but it is clearly too ambiguous to use as the basis for denying the worth of a whole segment of the human family

Romans 1:18-32

For our discussion, this is the most controversial biblical passage of them all. In Romans 1:26-27 the apostle Paul describes non-Jewish women who exchange "natural use for unnatural" and non-Jewish men who "leave the natural use of women, working shame with each other."

This verse appears to be clear: Paul sees women having sex with women and men having sex with men, and he condemns that practice. But let's go back 2,000 years and try to understand why.

Paul is writing this letter to Rome after his missionary tour of the Mediterranean. On his journey Paul had seen great temples built to honor Aphrodite, Diana, and other fertility gods and goddesses of sex and passion instead of the one true God the apostle honors. Apparently, these priests and priestesses engaged in some odd sexual behaviors -- including castrating themselves, carrying on drunken sexual orgies, and even having sex with young temple prostitutes (male and female) -- all to honor the gods of sex and pleasure.⁵

Did these priests and priestesses get into these behaviors because they were lesbian or gay? Probably not. Did God abandon them because they were practicing homosexuals? No; the people Paul had in mind refused to acknowledge and worship God, and for this reason were abandoned by God. And being abandoned by God, they sank into sexual depravity.

It is unreasonable (and unjust) to compare love between two people -- whether gay or straight -- to the rituals of the priests and priestesses who pranced around the statues of Aphrodite and Diana. This passage says a lot about God, but nothing about homosexuality as we understand it.

And one more thing -- Paul begins Chapter 2 of Romans, which immediately follows this passage, with these words: "Therefore, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself..." Even after he describes the disturbing practices he has seen, Paul warns us that judging others is God's business, not ours.

One final word:

If in our Reformed tradition the Bible is *a* central revelation of God, then as Christians, it is Christ who is *the* central revelation of God for us. Not the Levitical laws, not the Apostle Paul, but Christ who is the center; we are, after all, called Christians, not Paulians or Levites.

So, what did Christ say about homosexuality?

Nothing; he never addressed the issue.

But what he did do was challenge all relationships between individuals and within society that were based in any way, shape, or form on wrongful exclusion, abuse of power, or spiritual or economic oppression. What Christ modeled was inclusion, integrity, love, respect, mutual

responsibility, faithfulness, commitment and a radical trust in the providence, love and presence of God who loves us even before we can attempt to do anything to justify ourselves.

As Christ's disciples, we are called to do the same.

¹ Our Reformed tradition, and most Christians, generally adhere to some commonly accepted principles for the interpretation of Scripture.

1. We interpret Scripture contextually. We ask about the literary context of the book in which a passage is found, and about the historical context of the situation it addresses.
2. We seek to apply scriptural teaching to the present through analogy, asking whether situations in the modern world are comparable to those in the biblical world, even if they are not exactly the same.
3. We interpret "scripture in light of scripture." This means that we try to reconcile what is said in one part of Scripture with what is said in other parts of Scripture, sometimes recognizing tension between texts that seem to say different things. We try to be faithful to the entire Bible rather than choosing some parts and leaving others alone.
4. We recognize that some scriptural points are more important than others. All of Scripture is the inspired Word of God, but what the Bible says about loving one's neighbor is more important than what it says about picking grain on the Sabbath, and what it says about justification by faith in Christ is more important than what it says about speaking in tongues or eating food offered to idols.

Jesus gives us principles for determining which matters are most important:

Matthew 7:12 "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 22:37-40 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

So does the Apostle Paul:

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...

... As well as other biblical writers:

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Hebrews 6:1-2 Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

5. We need to determine the extent to which a particular biblical teaching applies to the present day.

For instance, modern Christians condemn slavery, which was permitted in biblical times.

For instance, modern Christians save money for retirement in spite of Matthew 6:19-21 (“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”).

For instance, women speak in church despite Paul’s declarations. (1 Corinthians 14:33b-35: “As in all the congregations of the saints,³⁴ women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”)

And women pray in church without head covering, in spite of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

² Going further, the essence of Genesis 2:24 – “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” -- is repeated throughout the New Testament:

- [Matthew 19:5](#): and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'
- [Mark 10:8](#): and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one.
- [1 Corinthians 6:16](#): Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."
- [Ephesians 5:31](#)
"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

But Jacob [Genesis 29:21-30] and other biblical figures had multiple wives, and quite a few heroes of the Bible bore children by concubines [e.g. Abraham, Genesis 16:1-4]. And today we consider polygamy as inappropriate for God’s people.

And while the Bible – as well as modern society – supports adults finding life-partners and marrying [Genesis 2:18], both Jesus [Matthew 19:12] and Paul [1 Corinthians 7:8] claim that it is acceptable (even preferable) for some people to remain celibate and to have fulfilling lives as singles. Indeed, the Church has celebrated

celibacy as a gift of God and commended the single life for those who choose it. And while Jesus speaks out strongly against divorce, both he [Matthew 5:32] and Paul [1 Corinthians 7:15] allow for divorce in certain instances, and the Church has continued to recognize that such dissolutions must sometimes be permitted, even if they are contrary to what would have been God's original intent.

And the Bible contains the following pronouncements:

If it is discovered that a bride is not a virgin, the Bible demands that she be executed by stoning immediately [Deuteronomy 22:13-21].

If a married person has sex with someone else's husband or wife, the Bible commands that both adulterers be stoned to death [Deuteronomy 22:22].

Except under certain circumstances, divorce is strictly forbidden in both Testaments, as is remarriage of anyone who has been divorced [Mark 10:1-12].

The Bible forbids a married couple from having sexual intercourse during a woman's period. If they disobey, both shall be executed [Leviticus 18:19].

If a man dies childless, his widow is ordered by biblical law to have intercourse with each of his brothers in turn until she bears her deceased husband a male heir [Mark 12:18-27].

If a man gets into a fight with another man and his wife seeks to rescue her husband by grabbing the enemy's genitals, her hand shall be cut off and no pity shall be shown her [Deuteronomy 25:11-12].

³ For instance, one of the Ten Commandments prohibited working on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:15). It even came with the same death penalty as is found in Leviticus 20:13. Unlike the law we are trying to understand, in the book of Numbers (15:32-36) there is a situation described where the Sabbath law was broken and the death penalty was invoked. You might conclude from this that you have a clear understanding of how God feels about breaking the Sabbath. It may appear very clear, until you read the gospels and notice Jesus' attitude and statements about the Sabbath (e.g. John 5:18: "For this reason [healing on the Sabbath] they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.")

Another example is hand washing. Mark 7:

¹The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and ²saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. ³(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles. [\[a\]](#))

⁵So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

⁶He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

" 'These people honor me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me.
⁷They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men. ^[b]⁸You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

The challenge for interpreters is to discern which passages Christians should regard as enduring or universal standards and which reflect matters specific to the culture of Israel. Why should the Church make the prohibition against homosexual intercourse a part of its current moral code while ignoring the prohibitions against a man and a woman having sexual intercourse during menstruation [Lev 18:19, 20:18], which carried with it the death penalty?

And what about this word *abomination* that comes up in both passages? In Hebrew, "abominations" are behaviors that people in a certain time and place consider tasteless or offensive. To the Jews an abomination was not a law, not something evil like rape or murder forbidden by the Ten Commandments. It was a common behavior by non-Jews that Jews thought was displeasing to God.

⁴ Now what do the Leviticus passages say about homosexuality? I'm convinced those passages say nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today. Here's why. Consider this single Bible passage that was used for centuries to condemn masturbation:

"He spilled his seed on the ground... And the thing which Onan did displeased the Lord: wherefore he slew him also" (Genesis 38:9-10).

For Jewish writers of Scripture, a man sleeping with another man was an abomination. But it was also an abomination (and one worthy of death) to masturbate or even to interrupt coitus (to halt sex with your spouse before ejaculation as an act of birth control). Why were these sexual practices considered abominations by Scripture writers in these ancient times?

Because the Hebrew pre-scientific understanding was that the male semen contained the whole of life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the man's sperm contained the whole child and that the woman provided only the incubating space. Therefore, the spilling of semen without possibility of having a child was considered murder.

The Jews were a small tribe struggling to populate a country. They were outnumbered by their enemy. You can see why these ancient people felt it was an abomination to risk "wasting" even a single child. But the passage says nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

⁵ The Bible is clear that sexuality is a gift from God. Our Creator celebrates our passion. But the Bible is also clear that when passion gets control of our lives, we're in deep trouble.

When we live for pleasure, when we forget that we are God's children and that God has great dreams for our lives, we may end up serving the false gods of sex and passion, just as they did in Paul's time. In our obsession with pleasure, we may even walk away from the God who created us -- and in the process we may cause God to abandon all the great dreams God has for our lives.

Resources:

James M. Childs, Jr., *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), specifically Chapter 1, “The Bible and Homosexuality” by Mark Allan Powell.

Mel White, “What the Bible Says – and Doesn’t Say – about Homosexuality,” <http://www.soulforce.org/article/homosexuality-bible>.

Walter Wink, “Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality,” *Christian Century*, November 7, 1979.