

# Homosexuality: Not a Sin—Not a Sickness

## What the Bible Does and Does Not Say



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### Homosexuality and The Church

The most beautiful word in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is "*whosoever*". All of God's promises are intended for every human being. This includes gay men and lesbians. How tragic it is that the Christian Church has excluded and persecuted people who are homosexual!

We are all created with powerful needs for personal relationships. Our quality of life depends upon the love we share with others, whether family or friends, partners or peers. Yet, lesbians and gay men facing hostile attitudes in society often are denied access to healthy relationships. Jesus Christ calls us to find ultimate meaning in life through a personal relationship with our Creator. This important spiritual union can bring healing and strength to all of our human relationships.

### Not a Sin - Not a Sickness

For many centuries, the Christian Church's attitude toward human sexuality was very negative: sex was for procreation, not for pleasure; women and slaves were considered property to be owned by males; and many expressions of heterosexuality, like homosexuality, were considered sinful. Such tradition often continues to influence churches today. Many teach that women should be subordinate to men, continue to permit forms of discrimination against peoples of color, and condemn homosexuals. They say that all homosexual acts are sinful, often referring to their interpretation of scripture.

Other churches today are influenced by a century of psychoanalytic thought promoted through a powerful minority in the field of medicine. They see homosexuality as some kind of sickness. Although this view has now been soundly discredited by the medical profession, some churches and clergy continue to be influenced by the idea. They say that homosexuals are "imperfect" and in need of "healing."

**The Good News is** that, since 1968, when Metropolitan Community Church was founded, the emergence of a strong lesbian and gay community, and the conclusions of new scientific studies on homosexuality have forced the Christian Church to re-examine these issues. A growing number of biblical and theological scholars now recognize that Scripture does not condemn loving, responsible homosexual relationships. Therefore, gay men and lesbians should be accepted - just as they are-in Christian churches, and homosexual relationships should be *celebrated and affirmed!*

### About The Bible:

The Bible is a collection of writings which span more than a thousand years recounting the history of God's relationship with the Hebrew and Christian people. It was written in several languages, embraces many literary forms, and reflects cultures very different from our own. These are important considerations for properly understanding the Bible in its context. There are vast differences in doctrines between various Christian denominations, all of which use the same Bible. Such differences have led some Christians to claim that other Christians are not really Christians at all! Biblical interpretation and theology differ from church to church.

### Biblical Interpretation and Theology

also change from time to time. Approximately 150 years ago in the United States, some Christian teaching held that there was a two-fold moral order: black and white. Whites were thought to be superior to blacks, therefore blacks were to be subservient and slavery was an institution ordained by God. Clergy who supported such an abhorrent idea claimed the authority of the Bible. The conflict over slavery led to divisions which gave birth to some major Christian denominations. These same denominations, of course, do not support slavery today. Did the Bible change? No, their *interpretation* of the Bible did!

## New Information Refutes Old Ideas

What influences lead us to new ways of understanding Scripture? New scientific information, social changes, and personal experience are perhaps the greatest forces for change in the way we interpret the Bible and develop our beliefs. Scientific awareness of homosexual orientation did not exist until the nineteenth century.

Most Christian churches, including Metropolitan Community Church, believe the Bible was inspired by God and provides a key source of authority for the Christian faith. Therefore, what the Bible teaches on any subject, including sexuality, is of great significance. The problem, however, is that sometimes the Bible says very little about some subjects; and popular attitudes about those matters are determined much more by other sources, which are then read into the biblical statements. This has been particularly true of homosexuality. But fortunately, recent scholarship refutes many previous assumptions and conclusions.

## What was the sin of Sodom? Genesis 19:1-25

Some "televangelists" carelessly proclaim that God destroyed the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of "homosexuality." Although some theologians have equated the sin of Sodom with homosexuality, a careful look at Scripture corrects such ignorance.

Announcing judgment on these cities in Genesis 18, God sends two angels to Sodom, where Abraham's nephew, Lot, persuades them to stay in his home. Genesis 19 records that "all the people from every quarter" surround Lot's house demanding the release of his visitors so "we might know them." The Hebrew word for "know" in this case, *yadha*, usually means "have thorough knowledge of." It could also express intent to examine the visitors' credentials, or on rare occasions the term implies sexual intercourse. If the

latter was the author's intended meaning, it would have been a clear case of attempted gang rape. Horrified at this gross violation of ancient hospitality rules, Lot attempts to protect the visitors by offering his two daughters to the angry crowd, a morally outrageous act by today's standards. The people of Sodom refuse, so the angels render them blind. Lot and his family are then rescued by the angels as the cities are destroyed.

**Several observations are important.** First, the judgment on these cities for their wickedness had been announced prior to the alleged homosexual incident.

Second, all of Sodom's people participated in the assault on Lot's house; in no culture has more than a small minority of the population been homosexual.

Third, Lot's offer to release his daughters suggests he knew his neighbours to have heterosexual interests.

Fourth, if the issue was sexual, why did God spare Lot, who immediately commits incest with his daughters? Most importantly, why do all the other passages of Scripture referring to this account fail to raise the issue of homosexuality?

## What was the Sin of Sodom?

Ezekiel 16:48-50 states it clearly. The people of Sodom, like many people today, had abundance of material goods. But they failed to meet the needs of the poor, and they worshipped idols. The sins of injustice and idolatry plague every generation. We stand under the same judgment if we create false gods or treat others with injustice.

## Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

Christians today do not follow the rules and rituals described in Leviticus. But some ignore its definitions of their own "uncleanness" while quoting Leviticus to condemn "homosexuals." Such abuse of Scripture distorts the Old Testament meaning and denies a New Testament message. *"You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination."* These words occur solely in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, a ritual manual for Israel's priests. Their meaning can only be fully appreciated in the historical and cultural context of the ancient Hebrew people. Israel, in a unique place as the chose people of one God, was to avoid the practices of other peoples and gods.

**Hebrew religion** characterized by the revelation of one God, stood in continuous tension with the religion of the surrounding Canaanites who worshipped the multiple gods of fertility cults. Canaanite idol worship, which featured female and male cult prostitution as noted in *Deuteronomy 23:17*, repeatedly compromised Israel's loyalty to God. The Hebrew word for a male cult prostitute, *qadesh*, is mistranslated "*sodomite*" in some versions of the Bible.

## What is an "Abomination"?

An abomination is that which God found detestable because it was unclean, disloyal, or unjust. Several Hebrew words were so translated, and the one found in Leviticus, *toevah*, is usually associated with idolatry, as in Ezekiel, where it occurs numerous times. Given the strong association of *toevah* with idolatry and the Canaanite religious practice of cult prostitution, the use of *toevah* regarding male same-sex acts in Leviticus calls into question any conclusion that such condemnation also applies to loving, responsible homosexual relationships.

### Rituals and rules found in the Old Testament

were given to preserve the distinctive characteristics of the religion and culture of Israel. But, as stated in Galatians 3:22-25, Christians are no longer bound by these Jewish laws. By faith we live in Jesus Christ, not in Leviticus. To be sure, ethical concerns apply to all cultures and peoples in every age. Such concerns were ultimately reflected by Jesus Christ, who said nothing about homosexuality, but a great deal about love, justice, mercy and faith.

### Romans 1:24-27

Most New Testament books, including the four Gospels, are silent on same-sex acts, and Paul is the only author who makes any reference to the subject. The most negative statement by Paul regarding same-sex acts occurs in Romans 1:24-27 where, in the context of a larger argument on the need of all people for the gospel of Jesus Christ, certain homosexual behavior is given as an example of the "uncleanness" of idolatrous Gentiles.

**Does this passage refer to all homosexual acts,** or to certain homosexual behaviour known to Paul's readers? Romans was written to Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, who would have been familiar with the infamous sexual excesses of their contemporaries, especially Roman emperors. They would also have been aware of tensions in the early Church regarding Gentiles and observance of the Jewish laws, as noted in Acts 15 and Paul's letter to the Galatians. Jewish laws in Leviticus mentioned male same-sex acts in the context of idolatry

### What is "Natural"?

Significant to Paul's discussion is the fact that these "unclean" Gentiles exchanged that which was "natural" for them, *physin*, in the Greek text, for something "unnatural," *para physin*. In *Romans 11:24*, God acts in an "unnatural" way, *para physin*, to accept the Gentiles. "Unnatural" in

these passages does not refer to violation of so-called laws of nature, but rather implies action contradicting one's own nature. In view of this, we should observe that it is "unnatural," *para physin*, for a person today with a lesbian or gay sexual orientation to attempt living a heterosexual lifestyle.

### Romans 1:26 is the only statement in the Bible

with a possible reference to lesbian behaviour, although the specific intent of this verse is unclear. Some authors have seen in this passage a reference to women adopting a dominant role in heterosexual relationships. Given the repressive cultural expectations placed on women in Paul's time, such a meaning may be possible. The homosexual practices cited in *Romans 1:24-27* were believed to result from idolatry and are associated with some very serious offenses as noted in *Romans 1*. Taken in this larger context, it should be obvious that such acts are significantly different from loving, responsible lesbian and gay relationships seen today.

### The Other Verses...

#### I Corinthians 6:9 & I Timothy 1:10:

Any consideration of New Testament statements on same-sex acts must carefully view the social context of the Greco-Roman culture in which Paul ministered. Prostitution and pederasty (sexual relationships of adult men with boys) were the most commonly known male same-sex acts.

#### In I Corinthians 6:9,

Paul condemns those who are "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind," as translated in the King James version. Unfortunately, some new translations are worse, rendering these words "homosexuals." Recent scholarship unmasks the homophobia behind such mistranslations. The first word - *malakos*, in the Greek text-which has been translated "effeminate" or "soft," most likely refers to someone who

lacks discipline or moral control. The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament but never with reference to sexuality.

**The second word, *arsenokoitai*,** occurs once each in I Corinthians and I Timothy, but nowhere else in other literature of the period. It is derived from two Greek words, one meaning, "males" and the other "beds", a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Other Greek words were commonly used to describe homosexual behavior but do not appear here. The larger context of I Corinthians 6 shows Paul extremely concerned with prostitution, so it is very possible he was referring to male prostitutes. But many experts now attempting to translate these words have reached a simple conclusion: their precise meaning is uncertain.

### Conclusion...No Law Against Love:

The rarity with which Paul discusses any form of same-sex behaviour and the ambiguity in references attributed to him make it extremely unsound to conclude any sure position in the New Testament on homosexuality, especially in the context of loving, responsible relationships. Since any arguments must be made from silence, it is much more reliable to turn to great principles of the Gospel taught by Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself. Do not judge others, lest you be judged. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is love . . . against such there is no law.

**One thing is abundantly clear,** as Paul stated in Galatians 5:14: "...the whole Law is fulfilled in one statement, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'".

## Insights from Other Bible Scholars

"The homosexuality the New Testament opposes is the pederasty of the Greco-Roman culture; the attitudes toward pederasty and, in part, the language used to oppose it are informed by the Jewish background."

*Robin Scroggs, Professor of Biblical Theology, Union Theological Seminary, New York City.*

"One cannot be absolutely certain that the two key words in I Corinthians 6:9 are meant as references to male homosexual behaviour."

*Victor Paul Furnish, Professor of New Testament Perkins School of Theology, Dallas.*

"The strongest New Testament argument against homosexual activity is intrinsically immoral has been derived traditionally from Romans 1:26, where this activity is indicated as para physin. The normal English translation for this has been 'against nature.' Two interpretations can be justified concerning what Paul meant by the phrase. It could refer to the individual pagan, who goes beyond his own sexual appetites in order to indulge in new sexual pleasure. The second possibility is that physis refers to the 'nature' of the chosen people who were forbidden by Levitical law to have homosexual relations."

*John J. McNeill, Adjunct Professor of Psychology, Union Theological Seminary, New York City.*

"A close reading of Paul's discussion of homosexual acts in Romans 1 does not support the common modern interpretation of the passage. Paul did not deny the existence of a distinction between clean and unclean and even assumed that Jewish Christians would continue to observe the purity code. He refrained. However, from identifying physical impurity with sin or demanding that Gentiles adhere to that code."

*William Countryman, Professor of New Testament, Church Divinity School of Pacific, Berkeley.*

"The Hebrew word 'toevah,' here translated 'abomination,' does not usually signify something intrinsically evil, like rape or theft (discussed elsewhere in Leviticus), but something which is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation, both of which are prohibited in these same chapters."

*John Boswell, Professor of History, Yale University, New Haven.*

## Helpful Reading:

The following books are highly recommended for those wishing to carefully study issues of homosexuality as related to the Christian Church:

Boswell, John (1980).

**Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality.**

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Countryman, L. William (1988).

**Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today.**

Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Edwards, George R. (1984).

**Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A biblical Perspective.**

New York: Pilgrim Press.

Furnish, Victor Paul (1979).

**The Moral Teaching of Paul.**

Nashville: Abingdon Press

Horner, Tom (1978).

**Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times.**

Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

McNeill, John J. (1988).

**The Church and the Homosexual.**

Boston: Beacon Press. Orig. pub. 1976

Scanzoni, Letha and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (1978).

**Is The Homosexual My Neighbor?**

New York: Harper and Row

Scroggs, Robin (1983).

**The New Testament and Homosexuality.**

Philadelphia: Fortress Press. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.