

The clash between Homosexuality and the Church rages on day after day; is there an end in sight? Holy Scripture speaks quite extensively on numerous topics however, on the topic of homosexuality it has rather little to say. The majority of the conversations we hear are by those who stand firmly entrenched on opposing sides of the battlefield. A unique reality is that the definition of a simple word could be at the heart of what has become one of the biggest theological debates of all times. A study of Scripture, traditions, experience, and reason may offer some hope and understanding of this incredibly complex theological and social enigma.

The first mention of ‘homosexual’ *activity* is found in the Old Testament in the book of Genesis. “But the men of the city, 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.’” (Genesis 19:4-7 NRSV). The second and third mentions of any prohibitions are in Leviticus. “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” (Leviticus 18:22 NRSV). “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” (Leviticus 20:13 NRSV). There is text in the book of Judges and Deuteronomy that some commentaries refer to as part of this debate however, after review; both seem to fall outside of the scope of this essay.

The texts in Leviticus are the primary references typically sighted in opposition of the homosexual issue, however; we also find three different texts in the New Testament that some theologians present quite strongly for their particular stance; one from Romans, 1st Corinthians, and 1st Timothy.

Paul’s text from Romans says, “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” (Romans 1:26-27 NRSV) and in 1st Corinthians, Paul says, “Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 NRSV).

In 1st Timothy we read, “This means understanding that 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, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching.” (1 Timothy 1:9-10 NRSV). These appear to be the key scriptures in the debate; the next step in seeking answers to this enigma is the interpretation of the Word of God.

To seek a better understanding of the scripture one would generally turn to Bible scholars and theologians to glean from their wisdom and their interpretations of God’s Word. In compiling the research, I found the prevalence of those adamantly opposed to homosexuality, are as plentiful as the stars in the night sky; their voices seem to always be the loudest. The goal then was to “hear” from the other side in order to gain full scope and perspective. The process I originally felt would be seemingly straightforward turned out to be much like the road from Jerusalem to Jericho; full of twists and turns and unexpected surprises. Let the journey begin.

The Harper Bible Dictionary, Revised Edition © 1996, states under the definition for homosexuality, “a word for which there is no specific equivalent in the Hebrew OT or the Greek NT, since the concept itself, as well as the English word, originated only in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there are a few biblical references to persons of the same sex who engage in sexual intercourse.”¹ (*Interesting note:* The 2011 Harper Collins Bible Dictionary has a slight variation in the definition and states, “...since the concept of homosexuality as a ‘sexual orientation’ originated

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: The Society of Bible Literature, 1996), 433

only in the nineteenth century.”² The research revealed a certain degree of ambiguity is present in many of the early Biblical interpretations beginning with those in Genesis.

The New Interpreter’s Bible commentary on Genesis states, “The author makes the depth of Sodom’s inhospitality immediately evident. Verse 4 shows that *every* man in the city was caught up in this threat of homosexual activity. If the assault had succeeded, the result could only be described as gang rape, not a private act.” The commentary goes on to say, “*We trivialize the narrative if we focus on the sin.*”³ Perhaps this is the reason Dr. Walter Wink, professor at Auburn Theological Seminary, brings a little different perspective.

Dr. Wink states, “We may begin by excluding all references to Sodom in the Old Testament and New Testaments, since the sin of the Sodomites was homosexual *rape*, carried out by heterosexuals intent on humiliating strangers by treating them ‘like women’, thus demasculinizing them. Their brutal gang-rape has nothing to do with the problem of whether genuine love expressed between consenting persons of the same sex is legitimate or not.”⁴ The Holiness Code of Leviticus deserves to be explored.

The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary states, “Homosexual behavior carries strong disapproval (Lev 18:22) perhaps because it too is connected with Canaanite practices or because it is an act considered contrary to human nature. This verse labels it an ‘abomination’, which comes from the root which means ‘to hate’ or ‘abhor’. The practice itself, *not the person*, is despised or hated.”⁵ Why is it that so many Christian’s seemed to have gotten the last sentence reversed?

² Mark Allen Powell, *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, Revised and Updated (New York, NY: The Society of Bible Literature, 2011), 388.

³ Walter Brueggeman, *The New Interpreter’s® Bible Volume I* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 474.

⁴ Walter Wink, *Christian Century*, (The Christian Century Foundation, 1979), 1082, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1265> (accessed July 18, 2013)

⁵ Brueggeman, 1127.

The commentary does acknowledge that society is changing and a number of the Laws set forth in the Holiness code are no longer recognized in modern society but stands firm and states, “The subject (*homosexuality*) arouses violent emotion on both sides of the issue, however, there can be no doubt about this text’s position on the matter. The Holiness Code does not consider homosexual activity between men (*women are not considered*) acceptable and judges it an abomination.”⁶ Not every theologian is so firm in their stand.

In his Bible Commentary on Leviticus, Samuel Balentine, (Russell T. Cherry, a professor of Old Testament studies at Baptist Theological Seminary, Richmond, VA) shares, “The issue of homosexuality has long vexed the religious conscience and moral scruples of the human community. The prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 must certainly be a part of our struggle with this issue, but it is wise to remember that they are only a part; a wide range of other considerations, social, biological, political, must also be factored into the positions we take. Even so, it is incumbent upon all who strive to tune their decisions to witness of Scripture that these particular texts be interpreted ‘*within the context*’ of their setting in Israel’s priestly tradition.”⁷ The emphasis on interpreting the text within the context of the setting seems to be something a number theologians avoid! Balentine brings out several other substantial points worth sharing.

The following three points are for consideration: “The ban on homosexuality is but one of more than a dozen behaviors proscribed in Leviticus 18 and 20, with no more importance than other prohibitions, many of which seem to not have made much impact on the community of faith. We do not measure obedience to God by killing children who curse their parents (20:9) or men who commit adultery with another’s wife (20:10).”⁸

⁶ Brueggeman, 1127.

⁷ Samuel E. Balentine, *Bible Commentary on Leviticus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 159

⁸ Balentine, 159

Point number two: “All prohibitions in chapters 18 and 20 assume a patriarchal structure for society; addressed primarily to males, not females. It may also be noted there is no proscription against lesbianism.”⁹ Point number three: “The latter part of the text ‘lie with a male *as with a woman*,’ is an idiom used only for homosexual acts performed by heterosexuals. The text does not address homosexuality in terms of a permanent sexual orientation.”¹⁰ The author’s insight although controversial is surely an impetus for a number of denominations to establish doctrines of greater acceptance to the gay and lesbian communities.

The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary regarding 1 Timothy 1:9-10 states basically the teaching is consistent with Paul’s views expressed in Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. The commentator does note that today’s Christian leaders have to determine whether the current conduct should be guided more by biblical teaching, or by changing appreciation of the complexities of human sexuality! “It is a test case in getting the balance right between the openness of faith and the more closed definition of the faith.”¹¹ The text in Corinthians holds the secret word.

One scholar noted an interesting observation regarding Paul’s “vice” list in 1st Corinthians. “Vice lists serve to define the borders and to mark what believers must assiduously avoid in their comportment. Vice lists are a common feature in Paul’s letters. In no instance is a vice labeled a sin (an important consideration in any case, but perhaps especially in our own time dealing with matters... such as the vice list in 6:9-10.” There are two terms that provoke special interest; the Greek words *μαλακοὶ* - malakoi and *ἀρσενικοῖται*- arsenokoitai.¹²

An internet search of these two words produces tens of thousands of web pages and blogs attempting to sway the vote on what Paul really means in Holy Scripture. One commentary stated

⁹ Balentine, 159.

¹⁰ Balentine, 159.

¹¹ Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter’s® Bible Volume XI* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 2000), 793.

¹² Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter’s® Bible Volume X* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 2002), 858-859.

that ‘malakoi’ actually meant soft and ‘arsenokoitai’ does mean sodomite. “If one knows nothing of the cultural practices and prejudices of Paul’s time, one can easily take those ancient terms from the context and make them what one wishes.”¹³ The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Revised Edition ©1996, has no reference to either of the Greek words. However, the newer 2011 Revised Edition does make reference to the Greek. The newer dictionary states, “The precise meaning of *arsenokoitai* is uncertain.” The reference also states, “Although the word *arsenokoitai* does not occur anywhere else in Greek literature, it is an obvious combination of *arsen* (‘male’) and *koitai* (‘to lie with [*i.e.*, *to have sex with*]’); accordingly, most scholars maintain that Paul had the aforementioned texts from Leviticus in mind when he used (or possibly coined) this term.”¹⁴ Based on my research and internet searches, this one simple (compound word) is fuel to the fire of this ever-growing controversy. The process of change on the issue is painful and slow however, some denominations have moved forward quite fast.

The Unitarian Universalist Church passed a resolution in support of gays and lesbian civil unions in 1984; in 1996 they passed a resolution to support the marriage of same-sex couples and in 2002 called the first transgender person to serve as a parish minister.¹⁵

The United Church of Christ ordained the first openly lesbian woman in 1977. In 2005 the General Synod passed a resolution in support of equal marriage rights for all people, regardless of gender.¹⁶

The Episcopal Church ordained its first openly gay priest in 1989 and in 1994 passed a resolution explicitly affirming that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people could not be refused ordination in the Episcopal Church. In 2003, the Episcopal Church made history by electing the first openly

¹³ Keck, 858-859.

¹⁴ Powell, 388

¹⁵ Jack Rogers, “*Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*” (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 138.

¹⁶ Rogers, 139

gay bishop. The worldwide Anglican Communion later rebuked the Episcopal Church for this decision. Many leaders in the church are clear that the ordination of LGBT clergy and blessings for same-sex marriages are an essential part of their ministry.¹⁷

The Evangelical Lutheran Church has not officially moved into acceptance of homosexual persons in ministry. There are, however, a number of their churches and clergy members that have blessed same-sex unions.¹⁸

The churches in the American Baptist Churches USA are autonomous, responsible for articulating their own doctrine, worship, and mission. This obviously results in a diversity of theological viewpoints and although the General Board in 1992 passed an anti-gay resolution, there are twenty-five openly gay and lesbian people serving as pastors in ABUSA congregations.¹⁹

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church outlines the church doctrine and states, “We affirm that all persons are of sacred worth, created in the image of God.”²⁰ The doctrine goes on to state, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God’s grace is available to all.”²¹ Traditionally the United Methodist Church is an open welcoming community of believers and does not reject or condemn, regardless of who you are! The church, however, does not allow the ordination of homosexuals.

¹⁷ Rogers, 140.

¹⁸ Rogers, 140.

¹⁹ Rogers, 141-142.

²⁰ L. Fitzgerald Reist, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), ¶161 F.

²¹ Reist, ¶161 F.

The Book of Discipline states, “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church.”²²

The questions still remain. The pain and suffering on both sides is evident and something has to change. The younger generations, the ones we often refer to as the future of the church, stand far from the view of the church when it comes to homosexuality. Adam Hamilton in one of his books shares results of a survey conducted by the Barna Group in 2007 that revealed that ninety-one percent (91%) of young adults labeled Christians as anti-homosexual. Only forty-three percent (43%) of those young adults said that homosexual relations are always wrong.²³

Rev. Hamilton writes, “I am not suggesting Christians should determine morality by survey. I am suggesting that young adults see the issue differently than their parent and grand-parents do.”²⁴ The issue is extremely complex and difficult to understand.

One of the many interesting points I noted was the newer the reference material, the more information on the subject it provided. In the case of the Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, a little over a decade between publishing dates made all the difference in how that publication remarked on the topic and even noting current social aspects of it. If history repeats itself, then we will see change!

Although some might say the arguments are weak, the reality is that we no longer stone adulterers; most people eat crabs and shrimp if they can afford them, and I believe most people wear clothes made out of more than one kind of material. Slavery was abolished, women on their menstrual cycle are allowed in public, we allow women in the ministry, and we allow people who have been divorced to become Pastors. Perhaps change will come one day.

²² Reist, ¶ 304.3.

²³ Adam Hamilton, *When Christians Get It Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010),86-88.

²⁴ Hamilton, 88.

I personally know a number of Gay couples (male and female). The couples I know are in loving committed relationships and the larger number attend church on a regular basis. I personally have a number of other friends, all of them sinners, who also attend church on a regular basis. The latter friends are not considered outcasts and shunned; they are allowed in church and allowed to fully participate in all aspects of church life. Perhaps the ticket into the inner sanctum is not wearing a name tag that says, “I am a Sinner”?

I cannot speak for the rest of the world however, for me as a follower of Jesus Christ the answer is love. If we are all created in the image of God, then we are created to be in community with one another. If, as the church, we really believe that we are made in the *imago Dei*, how can we count one sin greater than another? How can we count one vice greater than another? How can we justify judging someone for any choice they make in life?

Judgment is God’s responsibility. “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you.” (Matthew 7:1-2 CEB). We are called to do exactly as Jesus did; be in relationship with our neighbor and love one another as ourselves. Is this the answer for the world? Perhaps not, however, it is the answer for this fallen, sinner. Amen.

Rev. Ted Henry

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