

A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality

by Mark L. Strauss and Peter T. Vogt

Bethel University is founded on the authority of Scripture as the Christian's rule of faith and life. This booklet, by Bethel Seminary faculty members Mark Strauss and Peter Vogt, explores what the Bible teaches on the subject of homosexuality. Strauss is a professor of New Testament and Vogt is an assistant professor of Old Testament.

Many of us have friends, family members, or co-workers who are practicing homosexuals or who have struggled with homosexual feelings. How should Christians respond to those who claim a homosexual orientation? What does the Bible teach about homosexuality and a homosexual lifestyle? These are questions we will address in the following pages.

Society's views on this topic have certainly changed over the last few decades. Historically in America, homosexuality was viewed as a taboo subject, seldom talked about in society and discussed even less in the church. When homosexuals were portrayed in the media, their behavior was generally considered to be immoral. Today, a sea change has taken place in society's perspective. The mainstream media – whether magazines, television, or cinema – generally treat homosexuality as a normal and acceptable lifestyle, the expression of one's natural sexual identity.

Those who speak out against a homosexual lifestyle are viewed as intolerant, bigoted, and even evil. Identifying homosexual behavior as “sinful” is considered “hate speech” and viewed as promoting violence against a persecuted minority. Analogies are often drawn between homosexual rights and those of ethnic minorities, and the homosexual agenda is portrayed as a struggle for basic human rights, a part of the larger civil rights movement.

Many Christians don't want to talk about this issue because of its volatility or because it makes them feel uncomfortable. Emotions run high, with anger and hostility expressed on both sides. But Christians dare not respond with either hatred or indifference. As believers we are called to put aside all anger and malice, and to love all people – even those who hate or persecute us (Matthew 5:44). We are also called to obey God's commandments as an expression of our love for him (1 John 5:3). These two biblical mandates remind us that there is an urgent need to

discern God's will and design for human sexuality and to address the issue of homosexuality in a fair, loving, and biblical manner.

Discerning God's Will in Scripture

Advocates of a homosexual lifestyle claim that the Bible never addresses the question of faithful and loving homosexual relationships. The few biblical passages that have traditionally been interpreted as prohibitions against homosexuality are, they claim, condemnations of sexual violence, pederasty, or "perversion" (defined as acting contrary to one's natural sexual orientation, whether homosexual or heterosexual). Since the Bible never condemns homosexual behavior, it is argued, we should accept it as a natural God-given orientation to be celebrated rather than censured.

We shall see below that the Bible does in fact condemn homosexual behavior in general, not just rape, pederasty, or perversion. But there is an even more fundamental problem with this argument. The Bible is not a quick answer book for every issue of life. The Bible says little or nothing explicit about myriad issues facing Christians today, including abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, gambling, drug addiction, environmentalism, nuclear weapons, pacifism, terrorism, and dozens of others. What the Bible does tell us is who God is and who we are in relationship to him. It tells how we were created to be in relationship with him and with one another, and what went wrong when humanity rejected God and entered a fallen state. It tells how God sent his Son Jesus Christ to redeem us so that we can be reconciled to God and to one another. From this basic awareness of who we are as God's people, we can draw conclusions about the kinds of decisions and behaviors God honors, and those he forbids. To answer questions about homosexuality, therefore, we cannot limit our discussion to the direct commands of Scripture, but must begin with fundamental questions related to our identity as psychological, social, spiritual, and sexual beings in relationship with God and with one another.

God's Design for Human Sexuality (Genesis 2:18-24)

The parallel creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 set the stage for all that follows in Scripture. Chapter one provides a summary overview of creation, teaching that humanity – made up of male and female in relationship with one another – is created in God's image as the pinnacle of his creation:

*So God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
Male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27, Today's New International Version or TNIV)*

The second creation narrative in chapter two focuses on the distinct creation of man and woman and their complementarity. Adam is incomplete alone, “*it is not good for the man to be alone*” (2:18), and so God creates Eve, a “*companion who corresponded to him*” (2:20, *New English Translation* or NET). Eve is made from Adam’s rib, and together they make complete humanity. Adam concludes,

*This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called “woman,”
for she was taken out of man.*

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this for the present discussion. In the pre-fall state, which is said to be “perfect,” God determines that the most suitable companion for Adam is someone different from, yet complementary to, him. God’s gracious gift of a suitable companion comes after Adam’s realization that no other creature would be able to meet his needs (v. 20). The perfect complement for Adam, and the resolution of his loneliness, was Eve.

The narrator then pronounces the God-ordained relationship between the two: “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*” The language of leaving parents and uniting with a wife confirms the establishment of a new covenant relationship that supercedes clan or parental allegiance. Becoming “one flesh” indicates both the spiritual bond and the act of sexual intercourse that consummates this covenant relationship, and is the sign of that established covenant. As the foundational creation account, the passage establishes God’s purpose and parameters for human sexuality: God meets the man’s need of companionship by creating a woman. The result is a monogamous heterosexual marriage relationship and the completion of the image of God. This is the God-ordained pattern for human sexuality. The implication of the passage is that any other sexual relationship outside of these

parameters – whether adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, polygamy, pederasty, incest, or bestiality – is contrary to God’s purpose for human relationships.

Advocates of the homosexual lifestyle sometimes claim that the only reason homosexual relationships are not mentioned in Genesis 1-2 is because the passage is about procreation, not about sexual love. But this ignores the foundational nature of the passage, which concerns not only procreation, but also the fundamental nature of the “suitability” of Eve as companion for Adam, as well as the establishment of marriage as a divinely ordained institution – the achievement of the image of God in the “one flesh” relationship between husband and wife. It is true, of course, as is sometimes noted by advocates of homosexual relationships, that this foundational text leaves much unanswered. Single people, for example, are not included in this discussion. Are we to conclude that theirs is a sinful lifestyle, since it falls short of the ideal described here? To put it another way, is the presentation of Adam and Eve here simply descriptive of one viable way of living and expressing sexuality, or is it prescriptive, indicating what is acceptable and suggesting that which is forbidden?

We can answer these questions only after an examination of the rest of the biblical witness. If the rest of the Bible could be fairly interpreted as condemning the single lifestyle, then we could conclude that perhaps the omission of that lifestyle should be taken as an implicit exclusion of that lifestyle. That, of course, is not the case. We now must ask whether or not there is any additional evidence that would suggest that homosexual behavior, though not mentioned in the creation accounts in Genesis, is nevertheless acceptable.

Biblical Prohibitions against Homosexual Behavior

The programmatic nature of Genesis 2:18-24 means that there would need to be very strong biblical evidence to overturn its precedent. In fact, there is none. Unlike the single lifestyle, the Bible consistently and universally treats homosexual behavior as sin, contrary to God’s purpose for human sexuality.

The Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13)

We will begin our examination with two texts in the *Torah*. The *Torah* was given as instruction from God to the people of Israel. Though we usually think of it as “law,” it is more accurate to conceive of it as “instruction.” The *Torah*, then, may be understood as instruction from God as to

how to live a life that is holy and pleasing to him. Contrary to how *Torah* is sometimes conceived, it is not given as a set of rules to ensure an austere and joyless life. Rather, it is a gracious gift from the Creator to the people of Israel to help them live out their lives in relationship with God.

The two texts in question here are part of that instructional material, found in the book of Leviticus. Though the English name of the book often leads people to conclude that what is contained in it is addressed to the Levites (ministers of God at the sanctuary), the opening verses of the book make clear that this is addressed not simply to the Levites and priests as a manual for them, but rather is addressed to all the people (Leviticus 1:2).

What is called the holiness code of Leviticus is likewise addressed to the people as a whole (Leviticus 18:2) as instruction in what is – and is not – acceptable behavior. It specifically condemns homosexual behavior. Leviticus 18:22 (TNIV) reads, “*Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.*” While some of the laws in the holiness code (including those regulating sexual behavior) reflect a desire to set Israel apart from the nations and protect the uniqueness of Israel, the use of the term “detestable” (tô^cēbâ) points to its universal scope.

The term tô^cēbâ is used to refer to something that is detestable or repugnant to someone. The detestable nature is determined by the person’s character and values. For God to declare something to be “detestable” is to declare that belief or practice to be contrary to his character. These are not things that are culturally bound and therefore limited to that time and place, but are universal since God’s character does not change. The use of the term demonstrates that this law regulating homosexual behavior is dealing with holiness (and is therefore relevant in all times and cultures) not purity (which is restricted in its direct applicability to ancient Israel).

The Sins of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Men of Gibeah (Genesis 19 and Judges 19)

Another text that, tangentially at least, takes up the issue of homosexual behavior is Genesis 18, the account of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham’s nephew Lot offers hospitality to God’s angelic messengers. The men of Sodom gather and seek to rape the visitors (Genesis 19: 5). Advocates of homosexual behavior rightly note that the primary sin in view here is not homosexual behavior, but rather being inhospitable. The specific form of inhospitality is

rape, something especially violent and abhorrent, whether homosexual or heterosexual. So, they conclude, this passage has nothing to contribute to a biblical view of homosexuality.

While it is correct to note that homosexual behavior is not primarily in view here, this text still sheds some light on how homosexual behavior is viewed from a biblical perspective. This is because the author of Genesis deliberately seeks to cast the people of Sodom as utterly depraved. The preceding chapter highlights Abraham's intercession for Sodom, during which God promises to spare the city even if only 10 righteous people are found in it. The subsequent destruction of the city, coupled with the description of "every" man, young and old, coming out to rape the angels, indicates that fewer than 10 righteous people were present.

The depth of depravity of the men of Sodom is illustrated by their intense desire to rape the angelic visitors. In a cultural environment that placed an extremely high value on hospitality and expected hosts to do everything possible to protect visitors, seeking to do harm to the visitors is especially egregious. But that great offense is compounded when it is homosexual rape the men were seeking. By seeking to force on innocent visitors violent sexual activity that (even apart from the violence of rape) is depicted in the *Torah* as being "detestable" to God, the men of Sodom are demonstrating that they are utterly depraved, and therefore worthy of God's judgment.

The passage in Judges 19 is remarkably similar to Genesis 19. The author of Judges was seeking to demonstrate that the people of Israel, rather than living out total loyalty to God through adhering to the terms of the *Torah* as he commanded, have instead become just like the people of Sodom. Like the men of Sodom, the Israelites show their utter depravity by seeking to commit rape. The author of Judges viewed the actions of the men of Gibeah in the same way Moses viewed the actions of the men of Sodom – as an indication of their utter sinfulness.

Humanity's Fallenness (Romans 1:18-32)

Romans 1:18-32 is the beginning of Paul's argument in Romans that all human beings are sinful and fallen, deserving God's condemnation. Although God has clearly revealed himself in creation, human beings have suppressed this knowledge. "*They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator...*" (1:25). The result of this, Paul says, is that "*God gave them over to shameful lusts*" (1:26a). He then illustrates this with reference to homosexual behavior:

Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26b-27 TNIV)

Paul's meaning seems clear: homosexual behavior is an example of the depravity that results from humanity's rejection of God. The phrase "*God gave them over...*," repeated three times in the passage (vv. 24, 26, 28), indicates that human beings received the natural consequences of their rejection and idolatry, which in this case was a distortion of their human sexuality.

Lest we identify homosexual behavior as somehow unique or the greatest of all sins, it should be noted that Paul goes on to list many other sins that result from our fallen state, including envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-hating, insolence, arrogance, etc. (1:29-31). Paul probably singles out homosexuality for discussion because same-sex relationships so clearly represent a *distortion* of the created order established in Genesis 2:18-24.

Advocates of homosexual behavior object to this conclusion, claiming that Romans 1 only condemns "perversion" (acting contrary to one's "natural" sexual orientation) not "inversion" (acting in line with one's "natural" sexual orientation). According to this view, Paul knew nothing about inversion and so could not have addressed it here. He is instead speaking, they say, about pagan sexual debauchery (like temple prostitution or the pederasty so common in the Greek world), not faithful, loving homosexual relationships. This is evident from the context, it is claimed, which concerns those who openly and defiantly reject God. This cannot apply, it is concluded, to practicing homosexuals who love, worship, and serve God.

This interpretation is a distortion of what the passage actually says. Paul does not qualify the context in which these homosexual activities take place, but rather addresses the fundamental *nature* of the actions themselves. Heterosexual monogamous relationships are "natural" (*physikos*), while homosexual ones are "unnatural" (*para physin*), that is, contrary to God's created order for human sexuality. Like premarital sex, adultery, or pederasty, homosexual sex is by *nature* wrong. The loving or faithful character of the relationship is irrelevant at this point. No one (we hope) would argue that pederasty (or adultery or incest) is acceptable if it occurs within a loving and faithful relationship.

Nor does the fact that many homosexuals claim to love and serve God mean that their actions are not sinful. Many people profess love for God and yet continue to sin, either intentionally or through self deception. The church at Corinth had members who claimed that their visits to prostitutes did not affect their spiritual state, but Paul strongly disagreed (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). Jesus said those who truly loved him would obey his commands (John 14:15, 23, 24; 15:10; cf. 1 John 5:2, 3; 2 John 6).

Pauline “sin lists” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:9-10)

Two other references to homosexual behavior appear in the letters of Paul. Both of these appear in lists or catalogs of sins common in the pagan world:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes (malakoi) nor practicing homosexuals (arsenokoitai) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 TNIV)

We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral and for those practicing homosexuality (arsenokoitai), for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine... (1 Timothy 1:9-10 TNIV)

The term *malakos* (plural, *malakoi*) used in the first passage means “soft” and was used by the Greeks of the passive male partner in homosexual intercourse. The translation “male prostitutes” is not quite right, since it is at the same time too general and too specific. It is too general because a male prostitute may service females, but the Greek term refers only to male homosexual activity. It is too specific because the term does not always mean a paid or coerced relationship. The NET Bible accurately translates *malakoi* as “passive homosexual partners.” The term *arsenokoites* (plural, *arsenokoitai*) which appears in both passages comes from two Greek words, “male” (*arsen*) and “bed” (*koite*), and is a more general term for male homosexual behavior. When used together with *malakos* it may refer to the active male partner.

Advocates of homosexual behavior sometimes claim that these passages refer not to homosexuality in general, but only to male prostitution (i.e., slave boys and their male customers). One serious problem with this interpretation is that Paul would then be condemning both the offenders (*arsenokoitai*) and the victims (*malakoi*) of this cruel institution. More likely, Paul is referring to homosexual behavior in general, where both are willing participants. This is confirmed by the fact that the other terms in the list are general ones, like idolaters, adulterers, and the sexually immoral.

One clarification is very important for our discussion. Neither term should be translated simply as “homosexuals.” This would today suggest that Paul is condemning homosexual orientation rather than homosexual actions. All the terms in the list refer to behavior, not to orientation or inclination (see more on this below). The TNIV accurately translates *arsenokoitai* as “practicing homosexuals.”

Some Common Objections to these Biblical Prohibitions

Having examined the biblical evidence, we may turn to common objections raised by the homosexual community:

“Jesus, our ultimate model, never spoke out against homosexuality.”

While it is true that Jesus never explicitly addressed homosexual behavior, this is not at all surprising. Jesus’ teaching primarily concerned the coming of the kingdom of God and the need to repent and respond in faith to God’s call. There are a host of behavioral issues that Jesus did not address, in which case we must assume that Jesus shared the same basic moral values as his Jewish contemporaries, revealed by God in the Old Testament. No one would argue that because Jesus did not address issues like rape, incest, or bestiality, then he must have approved of these practices.

In fact, Jesus did *positively* affirm God’s intention for human sexuality when the Pharisees questioned him concerning grounds for divorce. In response Jesus denied that divorce was part of God’s plan and cited Genesis 1:27 and 2:4 to affirm God’s design for lifelong, heterosexual relationships:

But at the beginning of creation God “made them male and female.”

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Mark 10:6-9 TNIV)

Nowhere does Jesus give the slightest hint that he approved of homosexual behavior. It would set a dangerous precedent to assume that Jesus’ relative silence on this issue (or any issue) may be used to overturn the uniform and unanimous biblical testimony. In any case, the exclusive appeal to Jesus’ teaching is unwarranted, since the Holy Spirit’s testimony through Paul and other biblical writers is equally authoritative as God’s Word.

“God made me this way, so my homosexual desires must be a good thing.”

This objection raises the question of the causes of homosexual orientation, which are certainly complex and not fully understood. It seems likely that there are environmental factors, and that socialization can affect sexual orientation. Some research suggests that men with a weak father figure or over-bearing mother have a greater incidence of homosexuality. There may also be genetic factors or factors related to hormonal influence on the prenatal brain, though these are more disputed.

However, even if genetic factors are proven to be an issue, this does not legitimize homosexual behavior. The cause of *all* sin may be said to be “genetic” or inborn in that it is a result of our fallen human nature. God did not make us this way. Rather, we inherited from Adam a natural inclination to sin: *“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned”* (Romans 5:12, TNIV). Since Adam’s fall, we are all inclined to reject God, to act selfishly, to hate our enemies, to cheat on our taxes, to cheat on our spouses. Salvation is about being delivered from these fallen desires and given a new Spirit-empowered desire to pursue God. It is about exchanging our old sinful nature for a new redeemed one: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17, TNIV). The simple truth is that we live in a fallen world and are all sinners. We all have sinful thoughts and desires. For some these are homosexual; for others they are heterosexual. In either case, God gives us the power to overcome temptation through the power of his Spirit.

No one would argue that a child molester's "natural" inclination to have sex with children legitimizes their behavior. Rather, we would say that – whatever social or genetic factors produced these desires – God can transform them through the redemptive power of the cross and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

This brings up a very important point for those struggling with homosexual feelings. Homosexual desires in themselves are not sin. There is an important difference between a homosexual inclination or desire, and homosexual behavior. Many people experience incredible anxiety and guilt because of homosexual feelings. The church needs to reach out and help these people. Like all other temptations, homosexual desires become sin when they are dwelt upon or acted out (James 1:14-15). As James tells us, the key is not to let that desire give birth to sin, but to deal with it in a constructive manner. And the church has an important role to play in this regard. We will discuss this more below.

“God accepts me as I am, so you should as well.”

This objection is a distortion of the meaning of grace. It is certainly true God offers free and undeserved grace to the sinner. But the sinner is called to repent, to turn away from sin and to live a life pleasing to God. In his encounter with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not condemn her, but he tellingly commanded that she *“Go now and leave [her] life of sin”* (John 8:11, TNIV). He did not accept her sin, he accepted *her*. The evidence of a life transformed by the Spirit of God is a desire to please and obey him. The church is *not* made up of a bunch of sinners refusing to give up their sin, but redeemed sinners who have entered the new creation in Christ, and are now being transformed by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

“It is not fair that heterosexuals have a sexual outlet in marriage while homosexuals do not.”

We may begin by responding that God can certainly change a person's sexual orientation. Many former homosexuals are living happy and fulfilled heterosexual lives today. But we must also acknowledge that God does not always change a person's sexual orientation, and many Christians continue to struggle with homosexual desires. And it would be wrong to suggest that such a change, though certainly possible for God to accomplish, is easy. A more complete answer is that temptation and frustration are a part of life for all of us. God does not always give us the things we desire, and prayers are not always answered the way we would like. The apostle

Paul prayed that God would remove his “thorn” in the flesh – probably some persistent physical ailment – but God responded that “*my grace is sufficient for you*” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). The point is that we all have “thorns” – areas of weakness and struggle. Many Christians are called to lifelong singleness and celibacy. Others live in marriages where one partner cannot perform sexually. All Christians need to deal with whatever temptations come their way, living in obedience to God’s Word. And God promises sufficient grace not just to survive, but to thrive in joyful contentment in him (1 Corinthians 10:13). Singleness and celibacy are a God-ordained gift and option for many.

In any case, the argument from fairness will not get us very far, since life is never “fair” in the sense of “the same for everyone.” Not everyone has equal abilities or opportunities. Some people are born with severe handicaps or deformities. Some suffer from debilitating diseases. Some die much too young. Life in this fallen world is not fair. Yet we are still responsible to God for what he has given us. We are still called to live lives of faith and obedience. Ultimately, our hope is not in the fairness of this world, but in the fairness of eternity, when God will reward all believers according to what they have done. We must remember that this life is preparation for an eternity lived in relationship with God as glorified human beings.

The Church’s Response to Homosexuality

Having examined the biblical perspective on homosexuality, we may draw some conclusions on how the church should respond to this issue.

1. The Church must reject the claim that sexual sin of any kind represents acceptable behavior. God’s Word, not changing cultural norms, must be the foundation for our faith and actions. This means that *all* sexual sin, including homosexual behavior, must be rejected. Too often, Evangelicals have sought to highlight the sinful nature of homosexual behavior, while overlooking the rampant adultery and fornication that pervade society and even the church.

2. The Church must love and embrace its homosexually-oriented members.

We must reject homophobia (hatred or fear toward homosexuals), and we must love and support those struggling with homosexual desires. We must create an environment where people can

openly discuss their feelings without shame or fear of rejection.

3. The Church must seek to meet the emotional needs of its homosexually oriented members.

Perhaps the greatest need for homosexuals – and for all of us – is for supportive and caring interpersonal relationships in the context of true Christian fellowship. The church must intentionally work toward creating authentic Christian community, both in small group ministries and in larger church gatherings, where those wrestling with homosexuality can experience Christ's love and forgiveness in a nurturing environment with a goal toward spiritual growth and maturity.

4. The Church must be a channel for God's love to a lost world.

Christians who have adopted a gay lifestyle frequently speak of the rejection and hostility they felt from other Christians. One homosexual writes: "The church's record regarding homosexuals is an atrocity from beginning to end: it is not for us to seek forgiveness but for the church to make atonement" (Rictor Norton). We may disagree with the content of this statement, but we must not fail to hear the pain that lies behind it.

Ultimately we need to ask, "How would Jesus have responded to practicing homosexuals?" The answer, of course, is the same way he responded to all sinners. He would love them and offer them the free grace of God. He would call them to repent and to live lives of holiness and faith. Like the father of the prodigal son, Jesus waits by the road longing for his wayward children to return to him, because "*The Son of Man came to seek and to save, what was lost.*" (Luke 19:10)

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