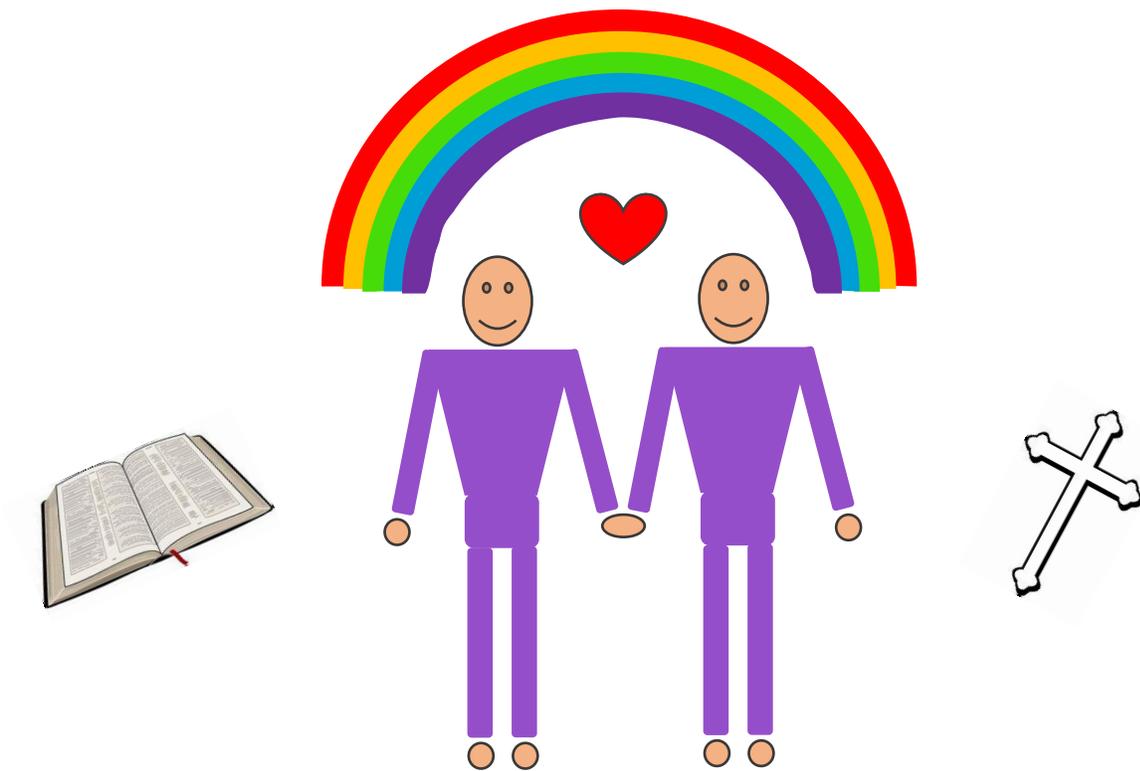


# The Bible Doesn't Say That Homosexuality is a Sin

An Analysis of the Seven Scriptures  
Sometimes Claimed to Refer to Homosexuality



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## **The Bible Doesn't Say That Homosexuality is a Sin: An Analysis of the Seven Scriptures Sometimes Claimed to Refer to Homosexuality**

Some Christians believe the Bible tells us that homosexuals are sinners. The current trend of increased acceptance of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community is distressing to these Christians who sincerely want to follow the Bible. They feel it's wrong to encourage homosexuals in any way because it would mean going against God's Word. This is one of the main reasons some people have so much trouble accepting homosexuals. They are using the words that appear in the scriptures in the Bible, at face value, to condemn homosexuals. Does the Bible actually condemn caring, consensual homosexual relationships? What was the original intent of these laws, lessons and guidelines written in the Bible so long ago?

This booklet examines seven scripture passages sometimes quoted that appear to some individuals to take a negative view of homosexuality. The work of several authors will be used who have studied the Greek or Hebrew words that appeared in the original texts. In addition, these authors have taken into consideration the customs, beliefs, religions and cultures of the time the Bible was written, in order to explain the original intent of the authors, as they wrote the laws and stories of the Bible centuries ago.

When the Bible was written, the Hebrew culture basically ignored the concept of a loving, committed, adult, homosexual relationship. One author, James Brownson, has pointed out that the Bible is essentially silent in addressing the contemporary experience of a consensual, same-sex relationship. (Brownson, pg. 41) In addition, the Bible doesn't use any words that explicitly mean "homosexual", nor does it specifically talk about rules concerning equal same-sex relationships. The question for us to answer is, what was the original intent of the ancient Jewish and early Christian authors who wrote the books of the Bible and how do these texts apply to homosexuals today?

The Bible is a living book and as Christians we can use the teachings of Jesus to help us interpret it. Author Adam Hamilton said that he believes it is acceptable to raise questions and to wrestle with the Bible when something in its teaching seems inconsistent with, among other things, the character of God revealed in Jesus Christ. (Hamilton, pg. 298) According to Jack Rogers, when we read the Bible through the lens of Jesus' redemptive life and ministry, we can see that both the Old and New Testaments command us to accept those who are different from ourselves. (Rogers, pg. 15) We should remember that Jesus was often challenged to interpret difficult questions concerning laws of the scriptures.

Jesus teaches us that loving each other is far more important than strictly following Jewish laws. He said that the first commandment is to love God and the second commandment is to love others as you love yourself. This booklet will give people who want to follow God's Word in the Bible an opportunity to see that the Bible does not condemn consensual homosexual relationships. This information allows people to dig deeper than just the face value of the words of these texts in the Bible. Included here will be research, historical facts and insights about the Bible from various authors that may be surprising to some readers. As Christians we know that God is always working on us and that lessons for us can be revealed through reading the Bible.

It is often from reading the words of the Bible that we are taught how to be the best we can be, so that we can truly love our neighbor, as we follow Christ.

All of us can admit that through the centuries Christians have made changes in the way we interpret the Bible on some important issues, such as slavery, the role of women and food laws. Jack Rogers asks, “How could most Christians for more than 200 years accept slavery and the subordination of women with not a hint that there was any other view in the Bible?” (Rogers, pg. 17) He explains that in the case of slavery, society accepted a pervasive prejudice and read it back into Scripture, with tragic consequences for those to whom these verses were applied. (Rogers, pg. 18) The text of I Timothy 6:1 requires slaves to “consider their masters worthy of full respect”. (Other similar passages that support slavery are found in Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-24 and 1 Peter 2:18.) In the ancient world, slavery was a given, but in the modern world we recognize that the master-slave relationship is a violation of the gospel and of human rights. Concerning women, I Corinthians 14:34-35 states that “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” The author of this passage, Paul, may have originally had a point to make, but today if we took this lesson to heart, where would our churches be? Women are often the backbone of the leadership in our modern churches. The contributions and importance of women pastors and women leaders in our society are impossible to ignore. We have certainly changed our attitudes and left behind this instruction by Paul. In reference to food habits, most Christians have decided not to observe the kosher laws found in the Old Testament pertaining to clean and unclean food. So there are rules and laws written in the Bible that we no longer follow. Our interpretations of the Bible can be changed.

Whether we realize it or not, we are each interpreting Scripture and making decisions as to how strictly to follow the laws in the Bible every day. Can we change the way we interpret scripture passages that appear to condemn homosexuality just as we were able to change our attitudes on slavery, women and food laws, despite the fact that some Bible passages appear to be to the contrary? What were the original authors trying to teach us? Are there other ways to interpret these scriptures rather than assuming we know what these words from so long ago mean for us today? Knowledge of the ancient culture which surrounded the original authors will certainly help us answer this question by shedding light on what these passages meant to their original audience.

Unfortunately, some of the writing here may be disturbing because by necessity it will focus on sexual relations. Many stories and parts of the Bible are disturbing, but we need to take a deeper look at these uncomfortable sections to learn what the Bible authors really meant and how this might allow us to compassionately interpret these scriptures for our lives today.

The Bible quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

A brief **SUMMARY** about each of the seven Scripture passages can be found on page 12.

## **Genesis 19:1-14 and 24-26**

*The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. <sup>2</sup>He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." <sup>3</sup>But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. <sup>4</sup>But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup>and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup>Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." <sup>9</sup>But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. <sup>10</sup>But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. <sup>11</sup>And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. <sup>12</sup>Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city – bring them out of the place. <sup>13</sup>For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it." <sup>14</sup>So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, "Up, get out of this place; for the LORD is about to destroy the city." . . . <sup>24</sup>Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; <sup>25</sup>and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. <sup>26</sup>But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.*

This story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about hospitality and the social requirement of helping visitors. When reviewed carefully it becomes evident that it is not a story having anything to do with homosexuality. The men in the town decide to do one of the most inhospitable things possible – rape. It would be unlikely for all the men of Sodom to be homosexuals, so why would they want "to know" (the euphemism used in the Bible to mean sexual relations) the two foreigners/angels except to have forced sexual relations with them. In the Near East during ancient times (and today in wars occurring in Africa and the Middle East) soldiers commonly used homosexual rape as a way of humiliating their enemies. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 5, citing Greenberg, pgs. 130, 147) The soldiers wanted to break the spirit of their defeated enemies and "treat them like women" by raping them. The practice was not driven by sexual desire, but by brutality and hatred toward the enemy. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 5) The sin of Sodom is about hard-heartedness, abuse, insult to the traveler, and inhospitality to the needy (Helminiak, pg. 46), not about committed homosexual relationships that exist today.

One of the most disturbing parts of the story occurs when Lot offers his two daughters "who have not known a man," to the town crowd. The story assumes that Lot is expected by societal norms to keep the visitors safe and that they have priority over his own daughters. Lot's offer makes graphically clear the value of women, relative to men, in that culture. In this story women

are not protected, and women become the means by which men are protected. (deGroot, pg. 22; Dwyer, pg. 8) In addition, if the men of the town were homosexuals, Lot would certainly have known that they would have no sexual interest in his daughters. Adam Hamilton states that he doubted any of the men of Sodom would have considered themselves homosexual by our definition today. Genesis 18 tells us the people of Sodom regularly practiced evil. This attempted gang rape was just the latest in a long line of horrible things the people of Sodom had done. (Hamilton, pg. 268)

Sodom is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible (Isaiah 1:10-17 and 3:9, Jeremiah 23:14 and Zephaniah 2:8-11) but the sins of Sodom, as identified in those texts, are injustice, oppression, partiality, adultery, lies and encouraging evildoers. (Helminiak, pg. 49) Even Jesus makes reference to Sodom in Matthew 10:5-15 as he talks about the rejection of God's messengers (Helminiak, pg. 49) but he, also, makes reference only to the town's lack of hospitality. "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment than for that town." Jesus is teaching his disciples that they will face rejection and predicts judgment against those who won't listen to God's word. If the main lesson to be drawn from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is an anti-homosexual message, wouldn't Jesus have mentioned that? Since he didn't, we are drawn to the conclusion that the Genesis passage has nothing to do with committed, homosexual relationships as we know them today.

### **Judges 19:1-30**

This is a story, even more disturbing than the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The two stories have many parallels. (To save space, only parts of this scripture will be included.) During the story, a man, his slave and his concubine (also referred to as his wife) travel to Gibeah, a Jewish city, where they thought they would be safe. They are finally taken in by an old man. This quotation starts with verse 22:

*<sup>22</sup>While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house so that we may have intercourse with him." <sup>23</sup>And the man of the house went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. <sup>24</sup>Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine, let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them, but against this man do not do such a vile thing." <sup>25</sup>But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and put her out to them.*

The story ends with the brutal rape and death of the concubine. The same lessons can be learned from this passage in Judges, as in the story of Sodom in Genesis, that rules and expectations of hospitality are the key theme, while homosexuality has nothing to do with this scripture. Rape, as a form of brutality and power, is another theme of both stories. The near rape of the two men/angels in Genesis 19 (the story of Sodom) and the gang rape of the concubine/wife in Judges 19 assist in shaping an understanding of how society should *not* act in Old Testament days. (Dwyer, pg. 19) The ancient authors wrote these stories to provide a powerful lesson that

hospitality to the outsider was very important for the Hebrew culture. Here in Judges, there are no lessons whatsoever that are related to consensual, homosexual relationships.

### **Leviticus 18:22**

*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*

### **Leviticus 20:13**

*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.*

To interpret these passages of Leviticus, it's important to know that this book of the Bible focuses on ritual purity for the Israelites, and setting guidelines for the Israelites to distinguish themselves from their pagan neighbors, the Egyptians and Canaanites, who lived in the lands before they were settled by the Jews. This is shown in Leviticus Chapters 18 and 20 by three specific scripture passages (Leviticus 18:2-3, 18:24 and 20:23) that state that the Israelites should never do what the Egyptians and Canaanites did. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 10) Biblical historians tell us that the Canaanite religions (which surrounded the Israelites at the time Leviticus was written) often included fertility rites consisting of sexual rituals in their temples. Sex with temple prostitutes, family members, and homosexual sex was performed at the Canaanite temples and thought to bring good luck to help crop and livestock production. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 11).

To Bible readers of today, the word “abomination” conjures up disgust, horror, or evil, but to the ancient Hebrews the word we translate as “abomination” simply meant unclean, taboo, or forbidden. The Old Testament uses the word “abomination” in reference to numerous things that were forbidden for the ancient Israelites, many of which make little or no sense to us today. For example, the Bible declares it an “abomination” to sow a field with two different kinds of seeds, or to weave a cloth from two different kinds of fibers (Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:11). It also uses the word “abomination” in Leviticus 11 in reference to a long list of foods that the Israelites were forbidden to eat, including shrimp, crab, pork, rabbit and many kinds of birds. (Helminiak, pg. 58) In discussing the Levitical texts that declare it an “abomination” for a man to “lie with a male as with a woman,” Jack Rogers points out that all these texts were concerned with “ritual purity” and were intended to distinguish Israel from its pagan neighbors. (Rogers, pg. 69; Helminiak, pg. 58) Rogers sets this concern over and against the teachings of Jesus, who is concerned not with ritual purity, but with purity of the heart (Matthew 15:10-20). (Rogers, pgs. 68-69; Brownson, pg. 42).

It is difficult to recapture the meaning of “clean” and “unclean,” “pure” and “impure,” as it was viewed in ancient Israel. (Helminiak, pg. 57) The ancient Hebrew people had very particular ideas about man and woman in relation to purity laws. Men were not allowed to touch women during menstruation (Leviticus 15:19). For a man to have sex with another man was to mix and confuse the standards of maleness and femaleness, and go against the accepted gender roles and disrupt the ideal order of things and thus was unclean, taboo or forbidden. It was against the purity laws and was therefore, by definition, an “abomination.” (Helminiak, pg. 58) The predominant topic of the Book of Leviticus was holiness and Chapters 17-27 are instructions from priests to the people of Israel. (Dwyer, pg. 24) If the Israelites did not follow these rules,

they would not be holy and according to their ancient views, a consequence of not being holy would be the loss of the land that was being gifted by God. (Dwyer, pg. 25) Keeping the land given to them by God was an enormous priority and that's part of the reason that the penalty of death was attached to breaking purity laws as written in Leviticus 20:13.

In addition, the growth in the number of people within the Israelite community was crucial to the survival of Israel. (Dwyer, pg. 30) Hartley argues that this is one of the chief reasons for these rules about sex and sexuality. The survival of the nation of Israel was at stake if it did not reproduce in appropriate numbers. (Dwyer, pg. 30, citing Hartley, pgs. 298-299) The androcentric (male-centered) mentality of the time and the cultural and societal need to increase the population of God's chosen people led the priestly authors of Leviticus to want to control women's reproductive capabilities, as well as to protect "the seed," thereby increasing procreation. (Dwyer, pg. 31, citing Cooper & Scholz, pg. 38) Again, this may have been why the authors decided to attach the death penalty to what could be seen as men wasting their "seed." For a man to act as a woman, and to act in a manner that did not keep the power-center in the man, would be shameful. This action would bring humiliation not only upon the man but on Jewish society and would interfere with how power was structured and understood. This type of behavior would challenge the patriarchal system that existed in that society and culture. (Dwyer, pg. 29)

An important point to remember is that these verses of Leviticus were saying, "Do not participate in the kind of immoral sex that was done in pagan temples because it is unclean and taboo in our Hebrew society and does not keep us different from the pagan societies that surround us." Back in ancient times it's understandable why the Israelite authors of Leviticus would include these rules in their writing, but for today it is evident that they were not referring to a committed, consensual, homosexual relationship.

### **Romans 1:18-27**

*<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; <sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.*

*<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*

*<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, <sup>27</sup> 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 and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*

Miner and Connoley suggest that in this scripture the author, Paul, is moving through a logical progression. He is talking about heterosexual people who refused to acknowledge and glorify God, began worshipping idols, were more interested in earthly pursuits than spiritual pursuits and gave up their natural, i.e., innate, passion for the opposite sex, in an unbounded search for pleasure. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 14) The behavior Paul was addressing here is explicitly associated with idol worship (probably temple prostitution) and with heterosexual people who, in an unbridled search for pleasure (or because of religious rituals associated with their idolatry) broke away from their natural sexual orientation, participating in promiscuous sex with anyone available. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 14)

Dwyer points out that in the Greco-Roman community to which Paul was writing, sexual relations between males were a given. These sexual relations between men were a part of the cultural life, the religious life, and the political life. (Dwyer, pg. 55, citing Byrne, pg. 65) But these were not the committed homosexual relationships that we see today. In that culture, their only perspective was that “natural intercourse meant the penetration of a subordinate person by a dominant one.” (Dwyer, pg. 55, citing Jewett, pg. 176) The laws at the time in Rome allowed a master to demand sexual services from any slave, male or female. “Intercourse between masters and their male slaves was normal and in accordance with the standards of a male-dominated society.” (Dwyer, pg. 55, citing Jewett, pg. 180) Roman culture was very hierarchal with those in power having free reign to act out sexually as they pleased among those who were of a lower cultural and societal standing. In Romans 1, Paul was speaking to the Gentile Christians and setting forth a counter-cultural stance that differed from the conduct of the surrounding community. (Dwyer, pg. 55) Paul is not talking about mutuality or love in a homosexual relationship. He is talking about the use and misuse of power and authority, and how that impacts one’s relationship with God. (Dwyer, pg. 57) Paul is saying that early Christians must worship God appropriately, not “use” each other in a sexual or other inappropriate way.

Adam Hamilton’s view is that when Paul takes up the issue of same-sex relationships in Romans, he seems to have in mind ritual sexual encounters tied to pagan worship/idolatry and the idea that what was natural or normative was clean and what was not natural was unclean and sinful. It has been thought by many that Paul was describing ritual prostitution practiced in some of the pagan temples. Hamilton goes on to say that if this is what Paul was condemning, then most would agree with his condemnation of these practices. But these practices, and the motivations behind them, are very different from two people of the same sex, sharing their lives as loving companions. (Hamilton, pgs. 270-271)

Some people interpret Romans 1:26 as referring to female-to-female sex, that is, lesbianism. Helminiak supports a very different interpretation. According to Helminiak, verse 26 refers to women and men engaging in sexual practices that were not the ones people normally performed in that culture. (Helminiak, pg. 79) He believes the Greek phrase *para physin*, translated as “unnatural” in Romans 1, would more accurately be translated as atypical, unusual, peculiar, out of the ordinary, or uncharacteristic. (Helminiak, pg. 80) The passage would therefore mean “simply that both the women and the men gave up the expected way of having sex for something else, whatever it might be.” (Helminiak, pg. 87) So Paul’s mention of “out of the ordinary” female sex might refer to heterosexual sex during menstruation, sex with an uncircumcised man, heterosexual oral or anal sex, or anything else that would not be considered the standard or

expected way of having heterosexual sex. If verse 26 actually does refer to lesbianism, the passage is quite puzzling because lesbianism is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, including the parts of Leviticus (discussed above) that declare sex between males to be an “abomination.” Brownson thinks that sex between females is not mentioned elsewhere because, unlike male-to-male sex, which was linked to pagan cultic practices, there were no assumptions regarding honor and shame surrounding sex between women, as there were if a man did something a woman was supposed to do. (Brownson, pg. 272) The bottom line here is that translation difficulties make the meaning of Romans 1:26 uncertain, and its supposed ban on sex between women is not supported anywhere else in the Bible. For these reasons, the Romans passage should not be relied upon as support for a blanket condemnation of lesbian sex. (Helminiak, pg. 89)

According to Rogers, Paul’s condemnation of immoral sexual behavior cannot be appropriately applied to contemporary gay or lesbian Christians who are not idolaters, who love God and who seek to live in thankful obedience to God. Today we know of gay and lesbian Christians who truly worship and serve the one true God and yet still affirm in positive ways their identity as gay and lesbian people. Paul apparently knew of no homosexual Christians, as we do today. (Rogers, pg. 76, citing Siker, pg. 143) Condemning the LGBTQ community was not Paul’s intent.

### **I Corinthians 6:9-10**

<sup>9</sup> *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites,* <sup>10</sup> *thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.*

In this passage, Paul lists several types of people he regards as sinful, and there are two words in the original Greek text that are relevant here, *malakoi* (the plural of *malakos*) and *arsenokoitai* (the plural of *arsenokoites*). Many people do not realize that the Bible does not contain a word equivalent to our English word “homosexual.” (Brownson, pg. 273) The concept of homosexuality, in the sense of a sexual orientation or in the context of a caring relationship toward others of the same gender, was unknown in the ancient world. Instead, this I Corinthians list of vices includes words that reflect sexual roles that were part of male behavior in the culture of the first century. (Brownson, pgs. 273-74)

The first word is *malakoi*, which literally means “soft” and is translated in the NRSV as “male prostitutes.” (Miner & Connoley, pg. 18) In terms of morality, during the first century, *malakos* referred to attributes such as laziness, degeneracy, decadence or lack of courage. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 17, citing Martin, *Arsenokoites and Malakos*, pg. 124). In the patriarchal culture at that time, being “soft like a woman” was a common insult. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 17) First-century Romans believed that any man who was more interested in pleasure than in duty, was woman-like. So Paul may have been referring to men who were weak or effeminate, such as those unfit for military service. In fact, the King James Version translates the word *malakoi* as “effeminate.”

*Malakoi* was also sometimes used to refer to male prostitutes, particularly young boys who were the passive partners in sexual relationships with men. (Dwyer, pg. 63) It was common at that

time for married heterosexual men to keep a boy, often one who had been captured and castrated, for sexual pleasure. (Dwyer, pg. 63) So Paul may have been referring specifically to male prostitutes rather than soft men in general (Miner & Connoley, pg. 18), and this would certainly be appropriate on a list of sins. Of course, this sort of abuse would be abhorrent and intolerable to modern Christians, but it does not refer to consensual relationships between same-sex couples.

The second Greek word used here is “*arsenokoites*,” translated in the NRSV by the ambiguous term “sodomites.” *Arsenokoites* is a composite of two Greek words, *arseno*, meaning “male,” and *koites*, meaning “bed,” with the connotation of sexual intercourse. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 18, Helminiak, pg. 109) But when these two parts of the word are put together, the meaning is unclear. It may refer specifically to a man who has sex with another man, or it may be referring to a man who has sex with anyone, outside of marriage, including possibly a woman. Think, for example, of the English word “understand.” It is composed of two words, “under” and “stand,” but its meaning does not relate either to the act of standing, or to being under something. (Rogers, pg. 70)

One way to learn a word’s definition is to analyze it in other contexts. However, the word *arsenokoites* is extremely rare, appearing in only one other place in the Bible, I Timothy, which will be discussed below. The Greek word, *arsenokoites*, is not found anywhere else in Greek literature prior to the first century, when these passages of scripture were written. It appeared in only a few writings after that, most of which were derived from the vice list which appears in I Corinthians, without any context to shed light on its meaning. (Miner & Connoley, pgs. 18-20; Brownson, pg. 42)

There are, however, a few stories in non-Biblical Greek literature that suggest the word *arsenokoites* refers to instances where one male uses his superior power or position to take sexual advantage of another. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 20) Many scholars therefore conclude that the term refers to forcible male-on-male sex, or to sexual exploitation involving prostitution. (Miner & Connoley, pgs. 20-21; Helminiak, pgs. 109-110; Rogers, pgs. 70-71, citing Martin, *Arsenokoites and Malakos*, pg. 121) In fact, several scholars emphasize the link between these two terms (*malakos* and *arsenokoites*) and the common Greek practice of pederasty, which is the sexual use of younger boys (possibly the word *malakos*) by older men (possibly the word *arsenokoites*). (Helminiak, pg. 110) In this context, these words are certainly appropriate on a list of sinful vices.

Another possible meaning derives from the fact that in the Septuagint (the Greek translation from Hebrew of the Old Testament), the two words *arseno* and *koites* are used separately in the Leviticus passages, previously discussed, that refer to a man lying with a man. (Dwyer, pg. 63) This raises the possibility that *arsenokoites* may be a shorthand way, in Greek, of referring to the acts forbidden in Leviticus. (Helminiak, pg. 111) It’s possible that I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10 (discussed below) may be repeating the prohibition in Leviticus 18:22, which (as we have seen) was specific to Jewish purity laws.

In short, no one is really sure what the words *malakos* and *arsenokoites* mean in this I Corinthians passage. The most that can be said, with any certainty, is that the passage appears to condemn sexual abuse and exploitation (Helminiak, pg. 113), a position with which all modern

Christians should readily agree. Given this uncertainty, the varying English translations of these obscure Greek words are a very slender reed on which to rely in condemning all homosexuals as sinners. (Helminiak, pg. 107) Ancient abusive sexual practices should not be used to justify the condemnation of consensual, committed, same-sex unions today. (Brownson, pg. 43) The meanings of the words are too vague to justify this kind of sweeping negative generalization about homosexuality based on Paul's list of sinners. (Rogers, pg. 71, citing Nissinen, pg. 118)

### **I Timothy 1:8-11**

<sup>8</sup>*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately.* <sup>9</sup>*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, <sup>10</sup>fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching <sup>11</sup>that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.*

These verses from I Timothy are similar to the passage from I Corinthians 6:9-10, discussed above, in that they contain a list of various sinners. Were the authors specifically saying that homosexuals, in an equal relationship, were sinners, too? Again, we must go back to the original Greek words and culture of the time to help us understand if the author's intent had anything to do with caring homosexual relationships of today.

The relevant Greek words that appear in verse 10 are  *pornos*,  *arsenokoites* and  *andrapodistes*. (Dwyer, pg. 76) Over the centuries, these words have been translated into English in a number of different ways. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, quoted above) translates them as "fornicators, sodomites, slave traders." The King James Version (KJV) uses "whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers." The New American Standard Bible (Updated) (NASB or NAU) uses "immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers," while the English Standard Version (ESV) uses "sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers." The New International Version (NIV) uses "for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders." These varying translations illustrate the difficulties inherent in grasping the original meaning of this passage.

The first word,  *pornos*, refers to a male having sex outside of marriage, that is, fornication or adultery. (Dwyer, pg. 76)

We have already discussed the second word,  *arsenokoites*, and the difficulties in translating it, in the preceding section on I Corinthians. To review, the only relative certainty is that this word refers to male same-sex relationships that involved some level of exploitation, inequality or abuse. (Brownson, pg. 43, citing Martin,  *Sex and the Single Savior*, pg. 43) It would be wrong to compare this kind of abusive same-sex relationship to a committed, loving, homosexual relationship.

The third Greek term,  *andrapodistes*, is translated as "slave traders." In the first century, both girls and boys were commonly kidnapped or captured and sold into sexual slavery. (Helminiak, pg. 113; Brownson, pg. 43) This may be why the word occurs next to  *arsenokoites* in the list of sins in I Timothy 1:10, since both involved sexual exploitation. Many scholars believe that the

three terms in this list belong together: kidnappers or slave dealers (*andrapodistes*) acting as pimps for their captured and castrated boys ( *pornos*) to service the men (*arsenokoites*) who use these unfortunate male prostitutes. (Brownson, pg. 274)

The author of I Timothy was certainly condemning the stock list of vices drawn from the culture at large. Scholars are in agreement that the lists from both I Corinthians and I Timothy were not originally Paul's. (Helminiak, pg. 112) He used these lists to encourage the early Christians to be good people by reminding them of the evils of the day, including same-sex behavior that involved exploitation, inequality or abuse. (Helminiak, pg. 112) Must all homosexual people be considered sinful just because the sex acts of first-century people known as *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* were regarded as such? It is justified to have a negative view of these abusive ancient sexual practices. But this attitude cannot be carried over to justify the condemnation of consensual, same-sex relationships. It is too much of a leap from this passage of scripture to a blanket condemnation of same-sex relationships that are equal, committed and loving.

### **SUMMARY of Each of the Seven Scriptures Sometimes Claimed to Refer to Homosexuality:**

As we have seen, the seven Scriptures sometimes claimed to be about homosexuality are not at all related to the consensual, committed homosexual relationships we see today.

1. Genesis 19:1-14, 24-26: The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of what happens when God's people do not live up to God's expectations. It is teaching a lesson about the importance of hospitality to the stranger. The cruel men of the town were planning to rape the visitors and were definitely not homosexuals.
2. Judges 19:1-30: This story parallels that of Sodom and Gomorrah and provides an example of how the townspeople plot to rape the visitor. It is yet another example for the ancient Jewish culture of how not to act by showing the extreme inhospitable behavior of the town. Some mistakenly interpret the townsmen's behavior to be somehow related to homosexuality, but this was an example of the brutality of one group of men toward a group of visitors.
3. Leviticus 18:22 and ...
4. Leviticus 20:13: These texts state that a man should not lie with another man, and that if they do it is an abomination. The rules were meant to set the Israelites apart from the Canaanites and Egyptians who at that time participated in fertility rites in their temples that involved different forms of sex, including homosexual sex. Male-to-male sex was seen to mix the roles of man and woman and such "mixing of kinds" during ancient times was defined as an "abomination," in the same way that mixing different kinds of seeds in a field was an abomination. This scripture occurs in a section of Leviticus called "The Holiness Code" which has as its main purpose to set out laws to keep Israel different from the surrounding cultures. (Helminiak, pg. 54)
5. Romans 1:18-27: The behavior Paul was addressing here is explicitly associated with idol worship (probably temple prostitution) and with heterosexual people who searched for pleasure and broke away from their natural sexual orientation or their natural ways of

having sex (both male and female) and participated in promiscuous sex with anyone available or used methods not culturally accepted. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 14) In the surrounding culture it was common for men of a higher status to take sexual advantage of male slaves or male prostitutes. Here Paul is instructing his readers to keep pure and honor God. Paul is talking about the use and misuse of power and authority and how that impacts one's relationship with God. (Dwyer, pg. 58) Paul didn't have in mind specifically prohibiting consensual same-sex relationships because they were never considered in his cultural context.

6. I Corinthians 6:9-10: Paul's list of sinners includes *malakoi* and *arsenokoites*. *Malakoi* means "soft" and is also interpreted as male prostitutes. *Arsenokoites* is difficult to translate, but it probably refers to a male using his superiority to take sexual advantage of another male. Paul is right to condemn these sexual activities, but this has nothing to do with a consensual homosexual relationship.
7. I Timothy 1:8-11: This passage is similar to I Corinthians, above. This time it is a list of sins (as opposed to sinners) and includes the words  *pornos*, *arsenokoites* and *andrapodistes*. *Pornos* most likely refers to a male having sex outside of marriage. *Arsenokoites* can probably be defined as male same-sex relationships that involved some level of exploitation, inequality or abuse. *Andrapodistes* can be translated as "slave traders." Scholars believe that the three terms were used together in that slave dealers (*andrapodistes*) would be acting as pimps for captured boys ( *pornos*) who would be taken advantage of by powerful men (*arsenokoites*). (Brownson, pg. 274) These are sins that certainly need to be addressed, but this Bible passage does not relate to homosexuals in a committed relationship.

### **An Example from the Bible of Affirmation of a Sexual Minority:**

#### **Acts 8:26-39 – Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch**

<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup> He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: (Isaiah 53:7-8)

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.*

<sup>33</sup> *In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth."*

<sup>34</sup> *The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”* <sup>35</sup> *Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.* <sup>36</sup> *As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”* <sup>38</sup> *He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.* <sup>39</sup> *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.*

When the New Testament was written, the term “eunuch” meant a man who, for a number of possible reasons, was incapable of or disinterested in having sexual relations with a woman. In Matthew 19:11-12, Jesus described three types of eunuchs:

- those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven,
- those who have been made eunuchs by others, and
- those who have been eunuchs from birth.

The first category to which Jesus may have been referring would include men (such as Roman Catholic priests) who take a vow of celibacy in order to serve God. The second category would include those who are incapable of fathering children due to castration or injury. (See for example Deuteronomy 23:1, “one whose testicles are crushed”.) The third category, those who are born eunuchs, would have been understood in Jesus’ day as including men with stereotypically effeminate characteristics and behavior. Jesus thus acknowledges that some people are sexual minorities from birth. (Rogers, pg. 131) This does not mean that all eunuchs were gay but such men were commonly associated with homosexual desire. (For a more detailed discussion, see Miner & Connoley, pgs. 39-46).

Eunuchs were often placed in charge of the harem in royal households because they had no sexual interest in the ruler’s wives and concubines. The resulting access to the royal household sometimes enabled such men to move into trusted senior government positions, and this was apparently the case with the Ethiopian eunuch discussed in Acts 8. He is described as the official in charge of Ethiopia’s entire royal treasury.

When Philip encountered the eunuch, the man was seated in his chariot reading Isaiah 53, a passage he may well have connected to his own situation. (Rogers, pg. 132, citing Jennings, pg. 155) As a eunuch, he probably felt humiliated and marginalized from the rest of society to some degree. (Rogers, pg. 132, citing Jennings, pg. 155) He had perhaps even been mistreated by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 43) Miner and Connoley suggest that the eunuch may have been familiar with Isaiah 56:3-5, a nearby passage that makes great promises to eunuchs who keep God’s commandments. (Miner & Connoley, pg. 43) Ancient prohibitions in the Old Testament barred eunuchs from entering the Temple or a worshipping congregation (Leviticus 21:16-23; Deuteronomy 23:1). (Rogers, pg. 133) But in Isaiah 56:4-5, the Lord specifically welcomes eunuchs who hold fast God’s covenant. (Rogers, pg. 133) The passage states:

*For thus says the Lord:  
To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,  
I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.*

The Ethiopian eunuch was a trusted official, but definitely a sexual minority and possibly a homosexual. Yet an angel of the Lord and the Holy Spirit specifically directed the apostle Philip to seek out this man. Philip knew the Ethiopian was a eunuch, but there is no record that he questioned the man about what kind of eunuch he was, the gender of his preferred sexual partners, or whether he had chosen to be celibate. Instead, Philip simply proclaimed the Gospel and the Ethiopian accepted the good news immediately, thereby becoming the first recorded Gentile convert to Christianity. When the Ethiopian asked to be baptized, Philip again saw no barriers and asked no questions. He simply got out of the chariot and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch on the spot.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this story about the Ethiopian eunuch to our modern quest for Biblical insights into homosexuality. The Holy Spirit could have chosen anyone to be the first Gentile Christian, but the Holy Spirit chose an African, sexual minority who showed faith. (Rogers, pg. 134) The conversion of this man of unconventional sexuality was of such great significance to the early church that it is included in the Books of Acts. The Bible's unmistakable message here is one of inclusiveness and of God's love for all people, regardless of their sexual preferences.

### **Conclusions:**

Many Christians want to remain faithful to God's Word through the Bible. This has caused Christians who read the Bible without background information or cultural context, to have difficulty accepting homosexuals. They see gays and lesbians as sinners who need to change and repent or remain celibate. But when we study the seven scriptures typically used to condemn homosexuals, it's evident that none of them have anything to do with consensual homosexual relations. At no place does the Bible refer to equal homosexual relationships, simply because such relationships were not recognized by Hebrew society when the Bible was written. Rather, the authors of the Bible directed the seven passages at the ancient Jews or early Christians to teach them to follow purity laws, to worship God and not idols, to be holy and honor God, and not to exploit vulnerable people sexually. These scriptures do not pertain to loving, homosexual relationships today.

When interpreting Scripture, we can use the teachings of Jesus to redirect us so that we can understand how to apply these scriptures to our lives today. Rogers states that we need to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus' redemptive life and ministry and accept those who are different from ourselves. (Rogers, pg. 135) When the Bible seems to teach us something that

causes us to be unfair to the human rights of others is exactly when we need to re-evaluate and use the principles of Jesus to interpret these scriptures. Jesus was radical in many of the ways he interpreted the Hebrew scriptures he had learned as a boy. The New Testament scriptures show that Jesus regularly put the importance of the human individual over the ancient Hebrew scriptures and laws.

Whatever the specific behaviors the Bible is condemning, the seven passages studied here cannot be used to condemn committed same-sex unions today. These ancient texts are speaking against pagan practices, abuse, and violations of what back then were commonly embraced standards of decency and “normality.” As such, these scriptures do not refer to committed, mutual and loving same-sex unions. The Bible is actually silent when it comes to addressing the ethics of committed, consensual same-sex unions. Some may be tempted to think that these seven passages might be construed as referring to homosexuality, but as we dig deeper we see that they were rightly condemning other things: gang-rape, temple prostitution, idolatry and pederasty (sexual relationship between adult male and adolescent boy). (Hamilton, pg. 271) These were the concerns that the Biblical writers were condemning, and rightly so. These practices and the motivations behind them are very different from two same-sex people sharing their lives together in a covenant relationship. (Hamilton, pg. 271)

As a society that obtains much of our moral guidance from the Bible, we need to move beyond these seven scriptures sometimes used to condemn homosexuals. We know that these scriptures were written for the Jewish people long ago, and for the early Christians for purposes very different from those for which some try to use them today. With confidence we can interpret these ancient Bible passages using compassion and love as our guide, as Christ would ask us to do.

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Janet Edmonds is a longtime member of Bethesda United Methodist Church in Bethesda, Maryland. Currently, the official policy of the United Methodist Church does not allow self-avowed practicing homosexuals to be ordained ministers, nor does it allow United Methodist clergy to officiate at same-sex marriage ceremonies or to hold these ceremonies in United Methodist churches. In addition, The United Methodist Book of Discipline currently states that, "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." Janet wrote this booklet to help people understand that the Bible doesn't say that homosexuality is a sin and with the hope of someday changing these United Methodist rules. As Christians, we are asked to seek justice. It is the author's hope that this booklet will help to bring justice for LGBTQ individuals who have been condemned far too long.

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