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The Bible and Homosexuality

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." John 8:32

Introduction

Metropolitan Community Church proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ that every person is loved by God. There is no condemnation because one is gay or lesbian. Perhaps you are gay or lesbian. Perhaps one of your loved ones or friends is. You undoubtedly know persons who are, whether you are aware of it or not. It may be that the traditional attitude of church and society toward gay and lesbian people causes you concern or pain. You may have become convinced that gay and lesbian people are shut out of Christ's realm and out of the Church.

Many people have been taught that the Bible condemns homosexuality.

Metropolitan Community Church believes that this is not the truth.

We believe that gay and lesbian people are completely loved and accepted by God.

Pastors Deb Coggin and Jen Glass share their thoughts about the Bible and homosexuality, so that you can consider a loving point of view that all of us are loved by God just as we are. Following are several studies that Pastors Deb and Jen hope may give you a fresh and uplifting view of the Bible and of some specific Biblical verses that are often used to cast gay, lesbian, transgendered, and questioning people in a negative light. Please accept these studies as our gift to you, given to you in God's love, light, and joy.

You may read each study in the order they are presented or you may click directly on specific passages. These are the studies:

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What About the Bible? Some Basic Information

By Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

An important part of church is that we often read and study what is known as the Bible. The Bible is an interesting book. Not just because of its contents, but also because of people's reactions, thoughts, feelings and understanding of it. In Metropolitan Community Churches, we believe that "That the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, showing forth God to every person through the law and the prophets, and finally, completely and ultimately on earth in the being of Jesus Christ."

When we as pastors present information on "Bible Basics," we often share some of the following ideas about this book. The Bible (Greek= ta biblia or the books) is a collection of books written thousand of years ago based on the perspective and experiences of people from a wide variety of backgrounds - culturally, sociologically, politically and economically.

As Christians, we believe that the Bible is a body of texts that were inspired by God (God-breathed) for the benefit of God's people and transmitted to humanity for the purpose of creating a written document of God's divine action in and among God's created order.

When looking at what we mean by the Holy Scripture, it is important to remember that the worth or value that

we as humans place on any one particular thing is usually a reflection of our own personal investment in what that thing can do or has done for us. The same is true for the Bible.

The fact that we acknowledge the scriptures as holy serves not only to set this book apart as unlike any other written document known to humanity, but it also increases the tendency for us to overlook the fact that the Bible, as we know it is a product of human hands.

The bottom line is that the inspired word of God was transmitted to human beings and through the lenses of humanity and human nature, this revealed word was interpreted for human understanding and appropriation.

Whether or not the Bible is the revealed Word of God is not the central issue here. As Christians, we profess this to be true. The human filters through which this revealed word has been made known to humanity, however, is the core of our study and discussion.

Understanding that the Bible is a product of human hands, then we must ask ourselves the question, how was scripture formed?

Because we understand the Bible to be a collection or library of many writings, we must be able to clearly ascertain how these writings came to be. Scholars are generally in agreement that the texts of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament originally began as stories that were shared and passed down simply by word of mouth. Thousands of years ago, the peoples who inhabited this earth as nomads spent very little time paying attention to, and even less time developing an appreciation for the written language.

Oral transmissions, or the art of storytelling then, became the means through which these various peoples remembered the legacy of their past, their history. Those who would be called the master story tellers would repeatedly tell the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, their families and experiences.

It would be during the time of Israel's greatest moments in history, during the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, that the desire would come, not only to maintain a written log of their current experiences, but also write down the past history as well.

In terms of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, there was clearly a two step process- first spoken, and second written. As these books were written down, they also became accepted as the religious norm or standard. The books were canonized as central tenets to and for the Jewish faith. The word canon comes from a Greek word that simply means measuring rod. When used to mean that the biblical books are a measure or standard for faith and life. The canon of Scripture, our Holy Bible was developed by the people of God in response to the need of the church.

Got any questions? About the Bible? About other matters of faith? Please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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What About the Bible? More Basic Information

By Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

Often the authoritative nature that is placed upon the Bible goes back to 2 Timothy 3:16 which reads, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness."

The word "inspired" in Greek literally means God winded or God breathed. To say that the Bible has authority is to say that the Scriptures were authored by no one else but God's self and as such, should be treated, read, and obeyed accordingly. Yet, even with this said, it should be noted that no one person looks at the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures in the same way. Thus, we suggest that scripture can be interpreted in four ways.

First, scripture can be interpreted in a Literalist way: God said it, I believe it and that settles it - sums up the understanding of the literalist school. Literalists believe in and adhere to the Word of God - as is - without alteration. This interpretation affirms that each word found in the biblical witness comes from God through God's inspiration and is not subject to and for debate. For literalists, every word of the Bible is totally inspired by God and contains truth free from error.

A second interpretation is Fundamentalist, which places very heavy emphasis on the truth that is revealed in the Bible. This interpretation affirms the teachings put forth in the Bible are God-inspired truths for humans to embrace and live out in their day to day lives. The emphasis is placed on the usefulness and applicability of the biblical ideas and concepts rather than on the actual words of the Bible itself.

A third interpretation is Non-Literalist, which treats the Bible as texts of sacred worth, stories of wisdom and faith applicable to our current circumstances. This interpretation is subject to study, analysis, and critical reflection. With this interpretation there is an extensive use of critical tools of analysis and interpretation utilized to uncover the deeper meanings that lie beneath the surface of the written text.

For non-literalists it is important to study the following:

- the original language
- the original audience
- the identity of the original writer in relationship to that audience
- the way the audience would have understood it

-then we can look at how it applies today.

A fourth Biblical interpretation is Liberationist, which also approaches the Bible as texts of sacred worth, as well as seeks to prove the intentional choice of God and Jesus Christ to work on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized peoples of the world, bringing hope, healing, restoration and reconciliation.

A Liberationist interpretation acknowledges that much of the bible and most biblical interpretations reflect the dominant social, cultural and political viewpoint. This approach prompts us to ask new questions:

- how does this passage speak to my experience
- who is invisible here
- what is not being said
- who is powerless
- what are the economic implications.

1. Literalist and fundamentalist approaches to scripture usually do not take into account the context - when and where the text was written; the content - the structure, form and meaning of words and phrases in a text; or the intent of scripture - the original purposes of the text as it was understood in that particular setting.

These two approaches do not follow a particular program of systematic study of the scriptures. These approaches do not take into account present day realities and situations which the Bible, no matter how much one may try, does not begin to address.

As pastors, we suggest considering the following six steps when studying scripture:

1. What is the Biblical passage that is being read?
2. Read the passage carefully, critically and suspiciously.
3. Research and study key words and phrases.
4. What is the context of the passage being read?
5. Research and review the original meaning of the passage.
6. Apply any lesson and meaning of the passage to the circumstance of today.

When studying scripture, you might want to use:

*A Good Study Bible (perhaps HarperCollins New Revised Standard)

*Bible Dictionaries

*Bible Commentaries

*Exhaustive Concordance - one which matches your translation

*Cross-referencing - The key question to ask when studying a particular text in the Bible is "can this text or one similar to it be found elsewhere in the Bible. And if so, where? What are the similarities? Differences?"

Got any questions? About the Bible? About other matters of faith? Please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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The Bible and Homosexuality – part 1

The Bible and Homosexuality: Queering the Bible

Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

We know that the Bible has been used to beat up certain minorities, and for us, that means GLBT persons. Yet, for both of us, we are dismayed and disheartened at the number of people in our GLBT community who are still afraid of the Bible because of these few verses. None of us needs to be afraid of God's word, particularly when there are so many parts of the Bible which affirm God's love and the goodness of God's creation.

As pastors, we think it is about time that God's people get real about God's word. Thus, when we teach about the Bible and Homosexuality, the third part of our presentation includes "Queering the Bible," based upon Queer Biblical scholarship. In our opinion, there are many passages in the Bible that affirm our queer lives.

As an introduction, let us explain the use of the word Queer. We use this term to describe our GLBT selves and sexual diversity. It is also a term used to define political dissidence and sexual difference. In the [Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation](#), "Queer Theory" states that the term is used to describe anything outside of the "norm," those not heterosexual.

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (www.m-w.com) says this:

2 a : differing in some odd way from what is usual or normal

b (1) : **ECCENTRIC, UNCONVENTIONAL**

d (1) *often disparaging* : **HOMOSEXUAL** (2) *sometimes offensive* : **GAY** 4b

usage Over the past two decades, an important change has occurred in the use of *queer* in sense 2d. The older, strongly pejorative use has certainly not vanished, but a use by some gay people and some academics

as a neutral or even positive term has established itself. This development is most noticeable in the adjective but is reflected in the corresponding noun as well. The newer use is sometimes taken to be offensive, especially by older gay men who fostered the acceptance of *gay* in these uses and still have a strong preference for it.

In recent years, there have been movements that seek to reclaim derogatory words from oppressive culture. Certain members of the GLBT community have done this with the word Queer. In fact, some would say that they have "taken back" this word and aren't letting anyone use this word against them any more. In fact, there is a book called "Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible" which is full of articles based upon Queer Biblical scholarship.

The "Introduction" of this text notes, "This anthology attempts to provide examples of a queer biblical hermeneutic that engages the entire Bible and its message, not just selected texts and characters. It is a strategy that outs the queer community by articulating the community's lived experience in and beyond the closet as well as its particular concerns when encountering and appropriating the biblical text. It is a strategy that attempts to take back the Bible as the Word of God for our community, instead of a club."

Many Biblical Scholars have been studying and writing in the field of Queer Biblical Interpretation which seeks to disrupt traditional heterosexist readings of the Bible by studying the bible, the ancient world, and the original languages of ancient Hebrew and Greek.

In this type of scholarship, there are several areas of focus. For instance, we identify texts that affirm same-sex love and the goodness of human sexuality. In addition, scholars "Out" the Bible and "reconstruct" the queer identities of Biblical characters. Further, we read the Bible from the social location of queers, as do African Americans, Women / Feminists, Latin Americans, Asians, Africans, etc. In this instance, the entire Bible and message is taken back as the word of God for a particular community. The Bible is viewed as "friend," another words not harmful, but life-giving as the word of God. This is where queer people find themselves and their story within the Biblical story, and read that story with hope and faith.

This article introduces our version of Queering the Bible. Our next article will begin looking at particular Queer texts that affirm same-sex loving relationships, such as David and Jonathon and Ruth and Naomi. Keep checking back for more!

If you have any questions about what we presented, the Bible and homosexuality, or other matters of faith, please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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The Bible and Homosexuality – part 2

The Bible and Homosexuality: Queering the Bible

Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

This is the second part of what we call "Queering the Bible" which is a section we include in our Bible and Homosexuality Workshop. We use the word Queer and its definition of being "different," as used in The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (www.m-w.com). In addition, we study and subscribe to the scholarship of Queer Biblical Interpretation, which seeks to disrupt traditional heterosexist readings of the Bible by studying the bible, the ancient world, and the original languages of ancient Hebrew and Greek.

For this article we want to look at particular Queer texts that affirm same-sex loving relationships, such as David and Jonathon and Ruth and Naomi.

While it is extremely difficult to ascertain the sexual orientation of ancient people, nevertheless, there is lots of speculation as to whether or not Jonathon and David were in gay relationship. However, gay or not, based upon the Biblical writings, Jonathon and David had a deeply emotional relationship. These two men seem to have a same-sex relationship. Several passages may cause us to question, were they just faithful friends or were they something more?

For instance, consider the verses 1-4 in chapter 18 of First Samuel. David had killed the giant Goliath and was taken to meet King Saul. During that meeting, Saul's son, Jonathon was instantly taken with David. In some Bibles, this section in chapter 18 has the title, "Jonathon's Covenant with David" and the New Revised Standard Version reads, "When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathon was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved."

Further, the people of Israel liked David and he was very successful. In fact, Saul becomes jealous of David. There are attempts to kill David and eventually, he has to hide. This upsets Jonathon, and eventually he goes to find David at his hiding place. During their encounter, "David rose from beside the stone heap and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more. Then Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.'" He got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city," is what is

written in 1 Samuel 20:41-42.

Eventually Jonathon is killed in battle and when David hears of it, he laments, "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." (2 Samuel 1:26)

These men were noble military leaders and it was possible they could have had a close same-sex relationship, even male to male sex, since that was known to occur in the military in the ancient world. Certainly based upon what we know from this Biblical story, these two men had some type of intimate relationship, physical and sexual or not.

With the story of Ruth and Naomi, again, it is difficult for us in modern times to determine the sexual orientation of these two ancient women. Nevertheless, from reading their story in the Bible, we might conclude that these two women had a very, very close relationship.

At the beginning of the book of Ruth we meet Naomi, whose husband and two sons die in another country the family had moved to. Naomi decides to return to her homeland and suggests to her foreign daughters-in-law to return to their families so they can get married again. One of them leaves; however, the other named Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. In what might be one of the most famous, romantic Biblical quotes, Ruth says to Naomi, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (the book of Ruth 1:16-17)

You might recognize this passage because it has often been used during marriage ceremonies. Isn't it ironic that this passage between two women gets read at heterosexual weddings? These verses are about one woman proclaiming her faithfulness to another woman.

Ruth does not leave Naomi, but goes with Naomi back to Naomi's homeland. Ruth eventually marries a male relative of Naomi's named Boaz and has a son with him. And these two women remain in each other's lives because the book of Ruth tells us that Naomi nursed Ruth's son whose name was Obed, and the women of the neighborhood claimed that, "a son has been born to Naomi." Once more, regardless of whether or not there was any physical or sexual intimacy, what we read about Ruth and Naomi seems to suggest a close same-sex relationship.

Thus, we can conclude from both of these stories in the Bible that they are Queer texts that affirm same-sex loving relationships.

This is simply a brief overview of material that we usually present during a four to six hour workshop. Our aim here is to briefly introduce some information in these articles. We can't possibly note everything here, so, if you would like more information or have any questions about what we presented, the Bible and homosexuality, or other matters of faith, please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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The Bible and Homosexuality – part 3

The Bible and Homosexuality: Queering the Bible

Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

This article is the third part of what we call "Queering the Bible" which is a section we include in our Bible and Homosexuality Workshop. We use the word Queer and its definition of being "different," as used in The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (www.m-w.com). In addition, we study and subscribe to the scholarship of Queer Biblical Interpretation, which seeks to disrupt traditional heterosexist readings of the Bible by studying the bible, the ancient world, and the original languages of ancient Hebrew and Greek.

In the last article we looked at particular Queer texts that affirm same-sex loving relationships, like David and Jonathon and Ruth and Naomi. In this article we seek to "Out" the Bible and "reconstruct" some queer identities of Biblical characters.

We wrote before and want to repeat again that it is extremely difficult to ascertain the sexual orientation of ancient people. All these years later, we can only speculate as to whether particular people were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. Nevertheless, we might consider that some of the persons in the Bible might have been queer.

For instance, there was the Centurion and his servant. A Centurion soldier came to Jesus and asked to have his servant healed. There is an account of this story in the Gospels of Luke chapter 7, verses 2-10 and Matthew, chapter 8, verses 5-13. In the ancient military in Rome and Greece, there was evidence that there were relationships between men. In addition, on the social stratus, free male citizens in Rome and Greece might have had relationships with not only women, but also younger men and servants, who were lower than them in terms of social status. This was said to have been acceptable. Thus, it is possible that the Centurion and his servant had some sort of relationship.

Further, servants were property and expendable as well as easy to acquire. So, why would the Centurion be concerned about having his servant healed? Why would he have gone out of his way to ask Jesus to heal his

servant? Another piece of evidence we have is that in the Gospel of Matthew, the Greek word used to describe the servant is *pais* which means "boy" and at times would suggest some further relationship.

Whether or not there was a gay relationship between the Centurion and his servant, Jesus does not question their relationship. For Jesus, what was most important was the faith of the Centurion. Nevertheless, in Queer Biblical Interpretation, these two characters are ones that are outted and held up as queer.

Another possibility of a queer character in the Bible is Jesus himself. Biblical scholars Robert Goss and Theodore Jennings propose that Jesus himself was gay. In fact, Jennings wrote a book called the [Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament](#). Their evidence includes information from the Gospel of John and the Secret Gospel of Mark and speculates that perhaps either Lazarus or the beloved disciple was the one Jesus loved.

For instance, in the Gospel of John, chapter 11 verses 1 – 46 we read the story of Lazarus' death and Jesus raising him from the dead. When Jesus finds out Lazarus has died and when Jesus arrives at Lazarus' home, he weeps. While this is a normal emotional response to a friend's death, people note in verse 35 how much Jesus loved him.

In relation to the one Jesus loved, Lazarus or beloved disciple, there was physical intimacy at farewell meal, which we read about in chapter 13 through chapter 17. In verses 23 – 25 in chapter 13, "the one whom Jesus loved" was "reclining" next to Jesus against his "bosom," which is the Greek word *kolpos*, meaning pocket or undergarment from the breast to the genital area. This was a place of honor to rest on Jesus' chest and suggests an intimacy between the two, perhaps sexual. The beloved disciple was the only male disciple at the cross and at the tomb, places that would have been reserved only for family members.

Plus, the disciple Jesus loved was with Jesus during his last appearance, found in the Gospel of John, chapter 21, verses 20 – 23. In this instance, Jesus pretty much tells Peter not to be concerned about the disciple whom Jesus loved. One might wonder why Jesus says this, something one might say for a lover?

Queer Biblical scholars also propose that the eunuchs may have been early predecessors to our transgendered persons. Eunuchs were castrated males, either by birth or accident or choice. They could not have children and because of this, they were prohibited from the Temple. Often they worked within government positions or guarded the women of the kings. Some eunuchs were thought to be effeminate and at times considered a third sex.

Thus, we can conclude from these examples in the Bible that there might have been some Queer persons in the Bible.

Please note that this is simply a brief overview of material that we usually present during a four to six hour workshop. Our aim here is to briefly introduce some information in these articles. We can't possibly note everything here and there is so much more that could be presented. So, if you would like more information or have any questions about what we presented, the Bible and homosexuality, or other matters of faith, please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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The Bible and Homosexuality: Sodom and Gomorrah

Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

Let's begin at the beginning with Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis.

Genesis 19 might be the most unlikely "clobber text" to condemn "homosexuality." What takes place in chapter 19 occurs in the middle of a story, which really begins in Genesis 18. To summarize, three men appear before Abraham; apparently God and two angels. Abraham extends elaborate Middle Eastern hospitality to them. The men promise Abraham and Sarah, his wife, a child in their advanced old age. God reveals to Abraham that there has been an outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and that God plans to investigate to see whether the complaints are legitimate. The angels proceed on toward Sodom while Abraham stays behind and engages with God. Abraham eventually gets God to agree to not destroy Sodom if even 10 righteous people can be found there.

Meanwhile, the two angels arrive at Sodom and are invited by Lot, Abraham's nephew, to stay at the night at his house. All of the people of Sodom, "to the last man" surround the house and demand that the angel be brought out so that they may "know" them. Lot offers his virgin daughters (our modern minds might pause on the fact that Lot offered his daughters and use this action as a caution against using this story as a paradigm of sexual ethics). The men persist and are struck blind by the angels. Lot and his family escape, although Lot's wife is turned into salt for looking back which was contrary to the angels' instructions. The cities are destroyed by sulfur and fire from heaven.

All in all, Lot takes some visitors into his house, who are angels, sent from God to get Lot out of the city. Lot offers hospitality to these strangers. Lot is gracious and kind as is expected of according to Jewish custom, much unlike the rest of the city.

Without a doubt, the people of Sodom were wicked, but it is a gross distortion to claim that their wickedness was grounded in a homosexual orientation. It is worthy to note that all of the men of Sodom were involved in this attempt. It is highly unlikely that all of the people involved were homosexual as the term is understood

today. So what might have been the motivation of these men that gathered that night?

It is essential to note that hospitality was important in the desert climate of Israel. The rule of society was to offer hospitality to travelers because to stay outside in such harsh conditions could be fatal. Apparently the rule is so important that one would not even harm an enemy who was offered shelter for the night. Therefore, Lot was willing to sacrifice his daughters rather than violate the rule of hospitality and turn over his guests to the crowd.

Plus, the men of Sodom and Gomorrah were more interested in demonstrating their superiority than offering hospitality to strangers. "All the people to the last man (NRSV)" demand to "know" Lot's visitors, which is translated from the Hebrew word *yada*, and implies having sex. Now how in an ancient Jewish city would every man be a homosexual and want to have sex with another man?

Also, it's interesting to realize that those who think "homosexuality" is condemned here fail to note that Lot offers his two virgin daughters to all the men of Sodom. Are all the men of Sodom really bisexual? Put simply, the men of Sodom wish to rape Lot's visitors. Forcefully having sex with them would be humiliating and disgraceful to the visitors. This type of conquest was common in ancient society among nations that conquered other nations, and not just men raping men, but men raping women as well.

In addition, don't miss the point that the people of these cities were wicked long before they demanded to "know" Lot's visitors and God had already decided their fate before chapter 19. So how can one avoid looking at what else these cities were doing that was wicked and only focus on this one act of "knowing?"

Plus, in this case we can use the Bible to interpret itself. For instance, some of the prophets refer to the sin of Sodom and it has nothing to do with "homosexuality."

For instance, in the book of the prophet Ezekiel we read, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it (16:49-50 NRSV)." The prophet is referring to the sin of not assisting the poor and needy by a proud, excessive people.

Jesus even refers to Sodom, accusing them of being inhospitable when he tells his disciples not to stay in places that don't welcome them (Matthew 10:14-15 NRSV). The disciples are sent out as travelers and strangers, much like the two angels in the story of Genesis. Jesus gives them instruction on what they are to do on their journey. He tells them if they are received they should stay. "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, then shake the dust off 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."

Based upon Jesus' reference, the issue appears not to be sexual sin but the treatment of strangers. It seems ironic that a passage which condemns the mistreatment of strangers is used to oppress a specific population of society.

Usually we address a passage such as this during a four to six hour workshop, so it is not possible to mention everything here. However, we hope that this has given you a good overview. If you have any questions about what we presented, the Bible and homosexuality, or other matters of faith, please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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The Bible and Homosexuality: Romans

Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

The passage in chapter 1, verses 26 and 27 of the letter to the Romans is the only biblical reference dealing with women and same-sex acts. These verses seem to be the most direct condemnation of same-sex sex in the scriptures. However, appearances can be deceiving since scholars disagree as whether this condemns homosexuality as we speak of today.

Thus, these two verses need to be considered in context, so a little cultural history is helpful. In 49 CE, Emperor Claudis expelled the Jews from Rome, including Jewish Christians. The Gentile Christians likely remained and their numbers grew.

In the beginning of the church, Jewish Christians needed to be convinced to include Gentile Christians into their circles without requiring circumcision. Later in 54 CE, the situation was reversed. Jewish Christians were returning to Rome and wanted to resume leadership roles. And Gentile Christians had to be convinced to include Jewish Christians.

Paul probably wrote the book of Romans between 55 and 58 CE. A key question which was debated at that point was keeping or not keeping Jewish Law. These verses are located within a larger argument. In almost three chapters, Romans 1:18 through 3:23, Paul argues that all human beings are sinful in that they rebel against the very power and priority of God. Paul first writes to the Gentiles (1:18-32) and starts out with stereotypical Jewish insults common in his culture to establish that Gentiles stood in need of redemption.

Next in 2:17-29, Paul begins to take on the Jews, lest the Jewish Christians feel superior to the Gentiles. Paul reminds them that they are under the power of sin as well. And finally in 3:22 and 23 Paul states that "all have sinned."

Within Paul's argument he points out that humanity had evidence of God's existence because people could see and experience God's good creation. People went wrong because they worshiped God's creation (in the form of statues of humans or birds or animals) instead of the Creator. Paul catalogs the by-product of this worship of creation, rather than the Creator, as including the exchange of "natural" intercourse for "unnatural" – men with men and women with women.

It is important to remember that Paul would not have understood that same gender attraction is the norm for some people today. He did not have the scientific methods, psychological and sociological analysis that we have today which has provided a wider view of human sexuality. Plus, there was no word in either classical Hebrew or Greek for homosexuality. What Paul criticized were people whom he felt were doing something that was unnatural for them.

One of the keys to the debate concerns the issue of "natural" and "unnatural." Paul uses the Greek words "phusikos" and "para" "phusis." "Phusikos," physis, meaning nature, as expected to be, characteristic, or ordinary, standard, expected, regular. "Para" means contrary to, unexpectedly, or in an unusual way and may refer to practices which are not the ones usually performed, beyond the regular, outside the ordinary, not expected. "Para" along with "phusis" then means unnatural, atypical, unusual, peculiar, out of the ordinary, uncharacteristic. Paul does not say these are wrong, just references practices that are different than usually expected.

Later in Romans chapter 11, verse 24, Paul uses the same words to talk about God. God grafts the wild branch (Gentiles) into the cultivated olive tree (Jews) to become one in Christ. God acts in the reverse order since it would have been usual to have a cultivated olive tree grafted to the wild branch. God did the unnatural, atypical, unusual. God was not bound by standard expectations, but goes beyond the prescription of culture and society. God's ways are not human ways. In Christ, God chose to do new thing.

In Paul's cultural context, sex was for the purpose of procreation. It would have been unnatural to have sex for pleasure. In the ancient world, sex between a man and a woman was viewed as natural, culturally prevalent and socially accepted. Also men were active and women were passive. Penetration by males and being penetrated by females were natural behaviors. Penetrative sex between men was unclean, abominable, blurred line of ideal male and female, and was disruption of the social order.

In the plan of this letter Paul uses a Jewish prejudice as a rhetorical device, mainly the issue of same-sex acts to counter and to play on Jewish self-righteousness. He sets up an argument of unnatural and impure as result of Gentile idolatry and not worshipping God or observing the religious law as Jews did. For Jews, those not sharing purity rules were viewed as unnatural, unclean and impure. Yet, later Paul writes "nothing is unclean in itself" (Romans 14:14). Paul counters his argument of clean and unclean, pure and impure to point out that these were creating divisions over issues which really did not matter. What mattered to Paul was faith and love in Jesus Christ. When looking at these verses in context they don't seem to be a do or don't list, but rather a theological commentary.

Further, we cannot be certain what Paul refers to in these verses. Some scholars debate that Paul was referring to pederasty and others, pagan temple prostitution.

Where does this leave us with Paul? As with most of the scriptural references to homosexuality, it leaves us without a clear and decisive position.

What we have written here really simplifies a lot of information since we usually address passages like this during a four to six hour workshop. It is not possible to mention everything here. However, we hope that this has given you a good overview. If you have any questions about what we presented, the Bible and homosexuality, or other matters of faith, please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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The Bible and Homosexuality: New Testament Letters

Revs. Deb Coggin and Jennifer Glass

Our belief is that homosexuality is not a biblical concern, and the two New Testament letter references, 1st Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1st Timothy 1:10, further support our belief. These two passages are usually looked at together since what is at issue is the translation of two Greek words, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

1st Corinthians 6:9-11 as translated in the New Revised Standard Version reads, "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes [*malakoi*], sodomites [*arsenokoitai*], thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers-none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." Chapter 1 verse 10 in 1st Timothy reads, "fornicators, sodomites [*arsenokoitai*], slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching".

Biblical Scholar Robin Scroggs warns that even before looking at the translated Greek words we need to look at these lists in context. The lists serve to remind people of the consequence of sinful living. He also points out that the lists like these were a standard literary form, used as a club to warn people, and that individual items listed and the situations addressed may be unrelated.

In the first letter to the Corinthians Paul is writing to a specific church concerning issues which concerned him. The issues involved a man living with his father's former wife, church members going to civil court against each other and the use of female prostitutes by church members. These underlining issues have nothing to do with

homosexuality. The verse in 1st Timothy 1:10 is part of a section which begins with verse 8 and includes verse 11.

Translation of these lists is difficult. There are no specific references to the two Greek words, translated as prostitutes and sodomites, anywhere else in the Bible. No Biblical scholar is certain of what these words mean because they are obscure Greek words.

Malakos, is the plural of *malakot* which was a common word meaning "soft." In the gospel of Matthew chapter 11 verse 8 this word is used to refer to "soft" clothing. In the ancient world sometimes this word was used to belittle men who were effeminate, woman-like or who in moral matters were loose and unrestrained. However, the effeminate was not linked to male-male sex in ancient world. This word probably does not refer to same-sex acts but it does seem to condemn moral looseness and undisciplined behavior that was lewd and lustful.

Arsenokoitai seems to be two words together, *arseno* which is a reference to men, and *koitai* which comes from a word that means bedroom or bed. Thus the reference might be to lying or having sex, or a "man-lier," a "man-sleeper" or a "man-penetrator." The earliest recorded use of this word is in the first letter to the Corinthians and the only other place it is used in the Bible is here in 1st Timothy.

Other ancient literature uses of this word are only in a half dozen places. The infrequent use of this word is usually found in "vice lists", similar to 1st Timothy. Scholars can only guess at what this word means. Some wonder if this was a reference or a repetition of Leviticus.

Use of a vice list in ancient world was common in the ancient world and some scholars think that even this use of the one in 1st Timothy is not Paul's thought but that it is from some other source, reflecting society at large. Social critics in the ancient world would have condemned behavior that was exploitative, even male-male sex. The reference seems to be abusive, exploitative, lewd, wanton sex even between men. Nevertheless, the use of these words doesn't seem to be a blanket condemnation of homogeneity.

Further, some of the problem in translation can be seen by comparing a number of recent modern translations. Not only have these ancient Greek words been translated as homosexuals, they have also been translated as catamites, sodomites, depraved, persons of sordid morals, effeminate, male prostitutes, sexual pervers. Further, the Roman Catholic Church in the New American Bible of 1987 translates *arsenokoitai* as practicing homosexual whereas in prior translations it was believed to be a reference to masturbation.

From these studies we can see that the translations of these particular Greek terms are difficult at best. We cannot say with any certainty that these words are a decisive condemnation of homosexual activity. Other literary works might reference male same-sex homogeneity, but if they do, then they condemn wanton, lewd, irresponsible acts, and do not condemn male same-sex homogeneity in general. Therefore, it would seem irrational to base the oppression of an entire group of people on, at best, inconclusive information.

What we have written here really simplifies a lot of information since we usually address passages like this during a four to six hour workshop. It is not possible to mention everything here. However, we hope that this has given you a good overview.

This article brings us to the conclusion of the six passages that the LGBTQ Christian community commonly refer to as "lobber passages" or "texts of terror." In our next article we will begin looking at particular passages of the Bible that are thought to be Queer texts. Keep checking back for more!

If you have any questions about what we presented, the Bible and homosexuality, or other matters of faith, please feel free to email Pastors Deb and Jen at pastor@visionofhopemcc.org.

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