

What the Bible Says - And Doesn't Say - About Homosexuality**
(excerpts from a longer article by Rev. Mel White- reference info at end)

Often people who love and trust God's Word have never given careful and prayerful attention to what the Bible does or doesn't say about homosexuality.

For example, many Christians don't know that:

- Jesus says nothing about same-sex behavior.
- The Jewish prophets are silent about homosexuality.
- Only six or seven of the Bible's one million verses refer to same-sex behavior in any way -- and none of these verses refer to homosexual orientation as it's understood today.

The Bible is a book about God -- not a book about human sexuality.

The Bible is the story of God's love for the world and the people of the world. It tells the history of God's love at work rescuing, renewing, and empowering humankind. It was never intended to be a book about human sexuality. In fact, the Bible accepts sexual practices that we condemn and condemns sexual practices that we accept. Lots of them! Here are a few examples.

- DEUTERONOMY 22:13-21
If it is discovered that a bride is not a virgin, the Bible demands that she be executed by stoning immediately.
- DEUTERONOMY 22:22
If a married person has sex with someone else's husband or wife, the Bible commands that both adulterers be stoned to death.
- MARK 10:1-12
Divorce is strictly forbidden in both Testaments, as is remarriage of anyone who has been divorced.
- LEVITICUS 18:19
The Bible forbids a married couple from having sexual intercourse during a woman's period. If they disobey, both shall be executed.
- MARK 12:18-27
If a man dies childless, his widow is ordered by biblical law to have intercourse with each of his brothers in turn until she bears her deceased husband a male heir.

Over the centuries the Holy Spirit has taught us that certain Bible verses should not be understood as God's law for all time periods. Some verses are specific to the culture and time they were written, and are no longer viewed as appropriate, wise, or just.

Often, the Holy Spirit uses science to teach us why those ancient words no longer apply to our modern times. During the last three decades, for example, organizations representing 1.5 million U.S. health professionals (doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, and educators) have stated definitively that homosexual orientation is as natural as heterosexual orientation, that sexual orientation is determined by a combination of yet unknown pre- and post-natal influences, and that it is dangerous and inappropriate to tell a homosexual that he or she could or should attempt to change his or her sexual orientation.

While there are some people now living in heterosexual marriages who once perceived themselves to be gay, there are millions of gay and lesbian persons who have accepted their sexual orientation as a gift from God and live productive and deeply spiritual lives. The evidence from science and from the personal experience of gay and lesbian Christians demands that we at least consider whether the passages cited to condemn homosexual behavior should be reconsidered, just as other Bible verses that speak of certain sexual practices are no longer understood as God's law for us in this day.

(Some Biblical passages often used to condemn homosexuality):

GENESIS 2:21-25—The Creation Story

...what does the creation story say about homosexuality? Because the text says it is "natural" that a man and a woman come together to create a new life, some people think this means gay or lesbian couples are "unnatural." They read this interpretation into the text, even though the text is silent about all kinds of relationships that don't lead to having children:

- couples who are unable to have children
- couples who are too old to have children
- couples who choose not to have children
- people who are single

Are these relationships (or lack of relationships) "unnatural"? There's nothing said here that condemns or approves the love that people of the same sex have for each other... So I believe the creation story says a lot about God's power and presence in the universe -- but nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

GENESIS 19:1-14—The Story of Sodom

Some people say the city of Sodom was destroyed because it was overrun by sexually obsessed homosexuals. In fact, the city of Sodom had been doomed to destruction long before. So what is this passage really about? Jesus and five Old Testament prophets all speak of the sins that led to the destruction of Sodom -- and not one of them mentions homosexuality. Even Billy Graham doesn't mention homosexuality when he preaches on Sodom.

Listen to what Ezekiel 16:48-49 tell us: "This is the sin of Sodom; she and her suburbs had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not help or encourage the poor and needy. They were arrogant and this was abominable in God's eyes." Today, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike do well to remember that we break God's heart when we spend all we earn on ourselves, when we forget the poor and hungry, when we refuse to do justice or show mercy, when we leave strangers at the gate.... But what does the story of Sodom say about homosexual orientation as we understand it today? Nothing.

It was common for soldiers, thieves, and bullies to rape a fallen enemy, asserting their victory by dehumanizing and demeaning the vanquished. This act of raping an enemy is about power and revenge, not about homosexuality or homosexual orientation.... The sexual act that occurs in the story of Sodom is a gang rape -- and homosexuals oppose gang rape as much as anyone. That's why I believe the story of Sodom says a lot about God's will for each of us, but nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

LEVITICUS 18:22 AND 20:13—The Holiness Code

Leviticus 18:6 reads: "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female. It is an abomination." A similar verse occurs two chapters later, in Leviticus 20:13: "A man who sleeps with another man is an abomination and should be executed." On the surface, these words could leave you feeling rather uneasy, especially if you are gay. But just below the surface is the deeper truth about God -- and it has nothing to do with sex.

Leviticus is a holiness code written 3,000 years ago. This code includes many of the outdated sexual laws we mentioned earlier, and a lot more. It also includes prohibitions against round haircuts, tattoos, working on the Sabbath, wearing garments of mixed fabrics, eating pork or shellfish, getting your fortune told, and even playing with the skin of a pig. (There goes football!) So what's a holiness code? It's a list of behaviors that people of faith find offensive in a certain place and time. In this case, the code was written for priests only, and its primary intent was to set the priests of Israel over and against priests of other cultures....

What about this word *abomination* that comes up in both passages? In Hebrew, "abominations" (TO'EBAH) are behaviors that people in a certain time and place consider tasteless or offensive. To the Jews an abomination was not a law, not something evil like rape or

murder forbidden by the Ten Commandments. It was a common behavior by non-Jews that Jews thought was displeasing to God.

Jesus and Paul both said the holiness code in Leviticus does not pertain to Christian believers. Nevertheless, there are still people who pull the two verses about men sleeping together from this ancient holiness code to say that the Bible seems to condemn homosexuality...I'm convinced those passages say nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today. Here's why. Consider this single Bible passage that was used for centuries to condemn masturbation: "He spilled his seed on the ground... And the thing which Onan did displeased the Lord: wherefore he slew him also" (Genesis 38:9-10). For Jewish writers of Scripture, a man sleeping with another man was an abomination. But it was also an abomination (and one worthy of death) to masturbate or even to interrupt coitus (to halt sex with your spouse before ejaculation as an act of birth control). Why were these sexual practices considered abominations by Scripture writers in these ancient times? Because the Hebrew pre-scientific understanding was that the male semen contained the whole of life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the man's sperm contained the whole child and that the woman provided only the incubating space. Therefore, the spilling of semen without possibility of having a child was considered murder. The Jews were a small tribe struggling to populate a country. They were outnumbered by their enemy. You can see why these ancient people felt it was an abomination to risk "wasting" even a single child. But the passage says nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

ROMANS 1:26-27—Natural and Unnatural

What does Romans 1:26-27 say about God?

For our discussion, this is the most controversial biblical passage of them all. In Romans 1:26-27 the apostle Paul describes non-Jewish women who exchange "natural use for unnatural" and non-Jewish men who "leave the natural use of women, working shame with each other."

This verse appears to be clear: Paul sees women having sex with women and men having sex with men, and he condemns that practice. But let's go back 2,000 years and try to understand why.

Paul is writing this letter to Rome after his missionary tour of the Mediterranean. On his journey Paul had seen great temples built to honor Aphrodite, Diana, and other fertility gods and goddesses of sex and passion instead of the one true God the apostle honors. Apparently, these priests and priestesses engaged in some odd sexual behaviors -- including castrating themselves, carrying on drunken sexual orgies, and even having sex with young temple prostitutes (male and female) -- all to honor the gods of sex and pleasure.

The Bible is clear that sexuality is a gift from God. Our Creator celebrates our passion. But the Bible is also clear that when passion gets control of our lives, we're in deep trouble. When we live for pleasure, when we forget that we are God's children and that God has great dreams for our lives, we may end up serving the false gods of sex and passion, just as they did in Paul's time. In our obsession with pleasure, we may even walk away from the God who created us -- and in the process we may cause God to abandon all the great dreams God has for our lives.

Did these priests and priestesses get into these behaviors because they were lesbian or gay? I don't think so. Did God abandon them because they were practicing homosexuals? No. In our Soulforce video, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*, the Rev. Dr. Louis B. Smedes, a distinguished Christian author and ethicist, describes exactly how the Bible says these promiscuous priests and priestesses got into this mess. Once again it has nothing to do with homosexuality:

"The people Paul had in mind refused to acknowledge and worship God, and for this reason were abandoned by God. And being abandoned by God, they sank into sexual depravity...The homosexuals I know have not rejected God at all; they love God and they thank God for his grace and his gifts. How, then, could they have been abandoned to homosexuality as a punishment for refusing to acknowledge God?...Nor have the homosexuals that I know given up heterosexual

passions for homosexual lusts. They have been homosexual from the moment of their earliest sexual stirrings. They did not change from one orientation to another; they just discovered that they were homosexual. It would be unnatural for most homosexuals to have heterosexual sex... And the homosexual people I know do not lust after each other any more than heterosexual people do... their love for one another is likely to be just as spiritual and personal as any heterosexual love can be."...

You'll also note that Romans 2 begins with "Therefore, [referring to Romans 1], you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself..." Even after he describes the disturbing practices he has seen, Paul warns us that judging others is God's business, not ours.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9 AND 1 TIMOTHY 1:10—"Malokois" and "Arsenokoitai"

To remind the churches in Corinth and Ephesus how God wants us to treat one another, Paul recites examples from the Jewish law first. Don't kill one another. Don't sleep with a person who is married to someone else. Don't lie or cheat or steal. The list goes on to include admonitions against fornication, idolatry, whoremongering, perjury, drunkenness, revelry, and extortion. He also includes "*malokois*" and "*arsenokoitai*."

Here's where the confusion begins. What's a *malokois*? What's an *arsenokoitai*? Greek scholars say that in first century the Greek word *malaokois* probably meant "effeminate call boys." The New Revised Standard Version says "male prostitutes." As for *arsenokoitai*, Greek scholars don't know exactly what it means -- and the fact that we don't know is a big part of this tragic debate. Some scholars believe Paul was coining a name to refer to the customers of "the effeminate call boys." We might call them "dirty old men." Others translate the word as "sodomites," but never explain what that means.

We all need to look more closely at that mysterious Greek word *arsenokoitai* in its original context. I find most convincing the argument from history that Paul is condemning the married men who hired hairless young boys (*malakois*) for sexual pleasure just as they hired smooth-skinned young girls for that purpose. Responsible homosexuals would join Paul in condemning anyone who uses children for sex, just as we would join anyone else in condemning the threatened gang rape in Sodom or the behavior of the sex-crazed priests and priestesses in Rome. So, once again, I am convinced that this passage says a lot about God, but nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

The biblical authors are silent about homosexual orientation as we know it today. They neither approve it nor condemn it.

We've looked closely at the six biblical texts used by some people to condemn homosexuality. But we must also remember that Jesus, the Jewish prophets, and even Paul never even comment on the responsible love a gay man or lesbian feels for another. The Bible is completely silent on the issue of homosexual orientation. And no wonder. Homosexual orientation wasn't even known until the 19th century.

The discovery that some of us are created and/or shaped in our earliest infancy toward same-gender attraction was made in the last 150 years. Biblical authors knew nothing about sexual orientation. Old Testament authors and Paul assumed all people were created heterosexual, just as they believed the earth was flat, that there were heavens above and hell below, and that the sun moved up and down...

The authors of the Bible are authorities in matters of faith. They can be trusted when they talk about God. But they should not be considered the final authorities on sexual orientation any more than they are the final authorities on space travel, gravity, or the Internet. Since the writers of Scripture are not the final authorities on human sexuality, since they didn't even know about sexual orientation as we understand it today, since Jesus and the Jewish prophets were silent

about any kind of same-sex behavior, I am persuaded that the Bible has nothing in it to approve or condemn homosexual orientation as we understand it....

There is a growing body of evidence from science, psychology, history, psychiatry, medicine, and personal experience that leads to a clear verdict: Homosexuality is neither a sickness nor a sin. Unfortunately, the church has always been slow, if not the last institution on earth, to accept new truth. In 1632 the scientist Galileo (who was a man of faith) dared to support the radical 15th-century idea of Copernicus that all planets, including the earth, revolve around the sun. Immediately, Galileo was proclaimed a heretic by the Pope who quoted Scriptures in his attempt to disprove what science was proving. Earlier, Protestant heroes had joined in quoting Scriptures condemning Copernicus. These weren't evil men. But they couldn't admit that the Bible was a book about God, not about astronomy -- just as good men and women today have trouble admitting that the Bible is a book about God, not about human sexuality.

Because Christians refused to let their understanding of God's Word be informed by science, Copernicus was condemned and Galileo was declared a heretic and placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life. In 1992, 359 years later, Pope John Paul II finally admitted the church had been wrong to ignore science and to interpret the Bible literally. The Pope said something we must never forget: "Recent historical studies enable us to state that this sad misunderstanding now belongs to the past." Unfortunately, the apology came too late to relieve Galileo of his suffering. What if the biblical scholars of Galileo's day had said to Galileo, "We don't agree with your Copernican theories, but we love and trust you. As long as you love God and seek God's will in your life, you are welcome here." Imagine the suffering that could be avoided if the church could say this to their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children: "We don't understand your views about sexual orientation, but we love and trust you. As long as you love God and seek God's will in your life, you are welcome here." Instead, well-intentioned Christians are driving their own children away from the church, using Scripture passages that may not even pertain to sexual orientation as we understand it.

Whatever some people believe the Bible says about homosexuality, they must not use that belief to deny homosexuals their basic civil rights. To discriminate against sexual or gender minorities is unjust and un-American.

Please consider one last thing. I love the Bible. I read God's Word in it and hear God's Word through it. But the United States is not a nation governed by the Bible. Our nation is governed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Our laws were created to protect an individual's right to disagree. If the Bible (or someone's view of the Bible) replaces the Constitution as the law of the land, we undermine the great foundation upon which this country was built....Can we support full civil rights for all... even if we disagree?...

I hope you'll agree that we are family, all sisters and brothers of the same heavenly parent. We may be different, but we can still live together in peace.

** The excerpts above are taken from a longer pamphlet written by Rev. Mel White, the co-founder of Soulforce. The article may be accessed in its entirety at the following url:

<http://www.soulforce.org/article/homosexuality-bible-gay-christian> .

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