

**WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS
(OR DOESN'T SAY)
ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY**



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An extended ministry of the N.W. Washington Synod of the ELCA
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How We Read the Bible

Proof Texting & Truth

The predominate societal prejudices against LGBT people are traditionally rooted in the interpretation of sacred writings—the Bible. To exclude LGBT people from Christianity, people use “proof texting.” It is the same technique used in the past to support other forms of bigotry and hatred, most notably slavery. Quotes from the Bible are still used today to perpetuate violence against women and against racial minorities.

Proof texting is the use of a single verse or phrase, taken from the Bible, that seems to pertain to a certain topic as proof of God’s opinion concerning that topic.

Three things are ignored in proof texting:

- The cultural setting of the original text.
- The original meaning of the language of the times in which it was written.
- The overall messages that surround the text and appear throughout the entire Bible.

Subtle errors are being made by those who claim they are preaching the truth based on “inerrancy” (without error) of the Bible. What those persons are really claiming is unerring *understanding* and *interpretation* of the Bible.

We must know several things to better understand the meaning of a verse of scripture:

- The social context in which the words of the text were written: What is the society, what is the culture?
- What specific situation prompted the text?
- How does the text relate to the overall view of the writer?
- How does the text relate theologically? How is it seen considering the whole message of the Bible – how does it relate to every other text?
- How does it fit into the overall picture of biblical faith?

Everyone, to some degree, interprets the Bible in consideration of the language and the time in which it was written, and of our understanding of the culture today.

GENESIS

Sodom & Gomorrah (Genesis 19:4-9)

Major observations question the theory that Sodom's destruction was due to homosexuality.

The Hebrew word "yadda" meaning "to know" is used 943 times in the Hebrew Scripture. Only 10 times is it used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse; and in each of these times it refers to intimate heterosexual relations. If to know referred to same sex relations, then Leviticus could have been stated far less awkwardly as "if a man knows a man as a woman." But it wasn't. To know didn't refer to same-sex behavior.

The Babylonian Talmud, an early compilation of the hundreds of years of oral discussions about the Torah, discussed the actions of Sodom in Genesis. There is no mention of homosexuality. There are allusions to heterosexual immorality by husbands with other men's wives, and horrendous stories of how travelers arriving there were treated, and deep hostility toward generosity and charity—but there is no mention of homosexuality in men or women.

Sodom is used a symbol of evil in dozens of places in the Bible. In not one instance is the sin of the people of Sodom specified as homosexuality.

Christ compared the sin of Sodom with the poor treatment of his apostles by a town, consistent with the Hebrew Scripture and Talmud discussions of grievous inhospitality. (*Matthew 10:14-15*)

LEVITICUS

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

The Levitical prohibition of male-male sexual activity was based on:

- A response to such practices as they related to idol worship in Canaanite culture.
- An ancient Jewish understanding of the ideal in creation.
- Protecting the system of patrilineal land tenure, purity of descent, and dwelling securely in the land
- An ancient Jewish male's horror that a man might somehow be treated as a woman—especially in gang-rape during war.

There is no mention that a woman should not lay with a woman as with a man. That thought was inconsequential to the Hebrew creation ideal. It was the Hebrew perception that the male was compromised by placing him in what they considered the lower role of a female.

The word commonly translated as "abomination" is the Hebrew word "toevah," meaning "ritually unclean,"—the same word used for shrimp, shellfish, and wearing cloth of two fibers. It was forbidden as part of the Hebrew need to identify and keep separate from the Canaanites with whom they lived; and was closely associated with idolatry.

ROMANS

Romans 1:25-27

In the Book of Romans, Paul describes the fall from true obedience to God. The intent of Paul is to show the Jew that he is on the same level as the Gentile: both are sinners and are in need of grace.

Paul is speaking of passions out of control, that become an end in and of themselves, and that are, in fact, idolatrous. Dishonorable passions refer to the worship of sexual pleasure, an excess to be condemned with all the other excesses.

Since the purpose is not ethical exhortation, it is illegitimate to use the passage to establish Christian objections to same-sex acts. The point of the passage is not to stigmatize sexual behavior of any sort, but to condemn the Gentiles for their general infidelity to God.

There was no idea of natural law at this time. The references to “against nature” are from the Greek words “para physin” (παρὰ φύσιν), which Paul uses later in Romans 11:24 when describing how God could graft Gentiles back into the tree of faith “against their nature.” Obviously God does not act against nature in an absolute sense. Romans 1:27 is talking about people doing things against their personal nature, for reasons of lust and idolatry. It isn’t talking about gay people or those acting in a loving manner.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10 and 1 TIMOTHY 1:10

The Greek and Roman cultures didn’t organize sex with the same words we would, which is a problem if you are speaking in Greek about sex. There were many kinds of sex that were considered very different from one another. Even within a marriage there were many other opportunities that weren’t considered infidelity by the Romans. Relations with someone of lower status—such as a slave, a prostitute, a temple acolyte—and sex with other men, were never considered infidelity, though there were strict rules on what men could and couldn’t do with other men and retain their honor. Also, in Paul’s time, there was an Imperial decree that all men must marry.

Corinth had the largest temple to Aphrodite in the Roman empire, over a thousand acolytes—both male and female—to help with worshiping needs that often included sexual activity with, or assisted by, the acolytes. Many of the topics covered by Paul in his letters to the Corinthians were because they basically lived in the “Las Vegas” of the time, with many Christians both working in temple-related industries and taking advantage of the services the temple offered. How Christians could make a living and still be in this community environment was a topic in Paul’s letters to the Christians there.

Paul is making a laundry list of all the different types of infidelity that his listeners might be considering, including: Female and male prostitutes (malakoi) and sex with men (arensenoikotai). But all of these were by their very nature idolatrous and adulterous. This was Paul covering all the angles of infidelity, which could be made clear only by listing all the ways people were having sex.

THE CENTURIAN

Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10

For many centuries, before Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels, the Greek word *pais* was commonly used to refer to the younger partner in a same sex relationship. There are many classic Greek texts that verify the term *pais* was used to refer to the male lover of another man.

The Roman centurion was forbidden by law to marry for his entire 25 years of service to the Empire. It was common for soldiers to have a male servant as their sexual companion, since that allowed them to have sex without risk of children. The centurion in these passages referred to his beloved *pais*, which implied a strong emotional connection.

Jesus commended the centurion for his faith and healed his servant. This story is important because many detractors of gay people say there are no positive examples in the Scriptures. This case, at least, *indicates* otherwise.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

Acts 8:26-27 reports Philip's encounter with a man who is an Ethiopian eunuch. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy 23, any man who was not "complete" was to be refused admittance to the assembly. Ultimately Philip looks to Isaiah 56, which says that eunuchs are welcome and God will give them that which shall not be cut off.

Acts 8 is a case study in holding one biblical text against another, and choosing God is to choose the inclusive over that which excludes. Philip makes this clear in his conclusion:

"Oracle of the Lord God: Gathering the banished of Israel, I will yet gather to them all who are to be gathered."

The lesson is not just about the Ethiopians, but about all who have been outcast—especially those excluded only by our reading of the scripture. We can see that Jesus was stretching our limits when he talks of people being made eunuchs by a gift from God in Matthew 19:12. His disciples were asking about being celibate, but Jesus chose to answer by raising up what most of the listeners would have considered the most low: those banished from the assembly of men.

If the outcast can, in truth, be the recipient of a gift from God, how can we assume who is truly cast out into the darkness? Christians must always err on the side of mercy and acceptance.

CORNELIUS

We all know about the New Testament discussions of what foods Christians can or can't eat. It was a major concern, covered in Matthew 15:10-20, Mark 7:14-23, Galatians 6:12-17, Romans 14:1-12, and 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

In Acts 11:1-18, Peter was led to the house of the Roman officer Cornelius through a vision in which he was instructed to “kill and eat” animals that were named as unclean in the Scriptures. This progressed with the Jerusalem Council until Acts 15; but even then it required Gentile Christians to avoid idols, strangled meat and blood—all things associated with pagan worship at the time. Paul, in Galatians, thinks they should be able to eat all things, but agrees with pagan ritual problems in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

We see again a situation where the choice is between exclusion and inclusion; and ultimately the Church, after decades of conflict, decided on inclusion: that the goal of Christ and His church was to welcome those who have been outcast and expand the grasp of His church to those who had previously been rejected.

GALATIANS 3:26-29 and COLOSSIANS 3:11-14

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

The Word is Out by Chris Glaser ISBN 0-664-25820-4

“If there is no longer male and female in Christ Jesus, it does not matter to God which gender we love, which gender we are, or which gender we believe ourselves to be.

“Divisions of race, nationality, class, gender, and sexuality drop away in this vision of the communion of the Church.

...

“Coming out is the unique sacrament that we offer the church. As with Communion, in which we give thanks for Jesus giving himself to us, we may give thanks for those who vulnerably offer themselves to others in the communion of coming out.”