

HOMOSEXUALITY, MARRIAGE, AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

2014

Increasing political and religious advocacy for homosexual¹ practices, same-sex marriage, and alternate sexual identities has prompted us to clarify our position on these critical issues. We believe that all matters of faith and conduct must be evaluated on the basis of Holy Scripture, which is our infallible guide (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Since the Bible does speak to the nature of human beings and their sexuality, it is imperative that the Church correctly understands and articulates what it actually teaches on these matters, which have now become so controversial and divisive.

A reaffirmation of biblical teachings has become all the more urgent because writers sympathetic to the LGBT (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender)² communities have advanced revisionist interpretations of relevant biblical texts that are based upon biased exegesis and mistranslation. In effect, they seek to set aside almost two thousand years of Christian biblical interpretation and ethical teachings. We believe these efforts are reflective of the conditions described in 2 Timothy 4:3, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”³ (See also v. 4.)

It should be noted at the outset that there is absolutely no affirmation of homosexual activity, same-sex marriage, or changes in sexual identity found anywhere in Scripture. Male and female genders are carefully defined and unconfused. The consistent ideal for sexual experience in the Bible is chastity⁴ for those outside a monogamous heterosexual marriage and fidelity⁵ for those inside such a marriage. There is also abundant evidence that homosexual behavior, along with illicit heterosexual behavior, is immoral and comes under the judgment of God.

We believe, in light of biblical revelation, that the growing cultural acceptance of homosexual identity and behavior (male and female), same-sex marriage, and efforts to change one’s biological sexual identity are all symptomatic of a broader spiritual disorder that threatens the family, the government, and the church.

This paper is a brief exposition of salient biblical teachings on homosexuality and the application of those teachings to marriage and sexual identity.

I. Homosexual Behavior Is Sin

Historically, homosexuality often has been defined as an emotional (psychological) or organic (physiological) problem. In recent years, some have lobbied mental health organizations to have homosexuality removed from the list of classified diagnostic pathologies, and many have come to see it as nothing more than a morally neutral personal preference or a naturally occurring aspect of human biological diversity. In making moral judgments, we must remember scriptural warnings against depending on our own reasoning or even personal experience to discern truth (Proverbs 3:5–6).

A. Homosexual behavior is sin because it is disobedient to scriptural teachings.

When God called Israel to be His people in a distinctive sense, He miraculously delivered them from Egyptian bondage. But God did more. He entered into a covenant relationship with them and provided the Law, predicated on love for God and neighbor, by which they could order their lives as a holy people. That law included specific prohibitions of homosexual practice, such as that of Leviticus 18:22: “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” Lest the previous injunction be misunderstood, Leviticus 20:13 provides a restatement, “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.” “Detestable,” used in both verses, is a strong word that indicates divine displeasure with sin.⁶

The Christian church has historically understood that although the ceremonial provisions of the Old Testament law were no longer in effect after the atoning death of Christ, the New Testament interpretation and restatement of its moral law continues in effect. On the subject of homosexuality, both the Old and New Testaments speak with one voice. The moral prohibitions against homosexual behavior in the Old Testament are pointedly repeated in the New Testament.

To those who witnessed on a daily basis the sexual license of imperial Rome, Paul depicted the results that followed in the lives of those who rejected God and “worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator. . . . Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations[7] for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations[8] with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts[9] with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error” (Romans 1:25– 27). Paul is referring to both male homosexuality and lesbianism.

In Paul’s day, the city of Corinth was especially notorious for sexual immorality. It was not only a crossroads of commerce, but of all kinds of vice. Because the church was being established in this city, it was important that new Christians come to understand God’s moral order. The record is explicit. Paul wrote, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” Then he continued, “Do

not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral[10] nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9–10 [NIV, 1984]). In this case, Paul is understood to identify male homosexuals in both active and passive homosexual behavioral roles.¹¹

Paul wrote, "Law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals"¹² (1 Timothy 1:9–10, NASB).¹³

An unbiased study of these passages makes it clear that Scripture consistently identifies homosexual behavior as sin. Not only do the Scriptures condemn more flagrant examples of homosexual violence and promiscuity, they also provide no support for the popular modern idea that loving and committed homosexual relationships between two long-term partners, even if legally married, are morally acceptable. Homosexual activities of every kind are contrary to the moral commandments God has given us.

B. Homosexual behavior is sin because it is contrary to God's created order for the family and human relationships.

The first chapter of the Bible says, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). After God had created the male, He indicated it was not good for him to live alone (Genesis 2:18). So God created a companion for him (Genesis 2:18). It should be noted that the male's aloneness was not to be remedied by the creation of another male but by the creation of a female. God created two sexes, not just one, and each for the other.

When God brought the woman to Adam, Adam said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." Scripture then states, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23–24).

In creating humankind God established the order of sexuality by which the race was to develop. Psychologically, the relationship is sound. Physically, the relationship is natural. Sociologically, it establishes the foundation for the family. The biblical order for human sexual expression is that of an intimate physical relationship to be shared exclusively within a lifelong marriage covenant—a heterosexual and monogamous relationship.

When people choose to engage in homosexual behavior, they depart from the God-given nature of sexuality. Their unnatural sexual behavior is a sin against God, who established the order of sexuality (Romans 1:27). And the social unit they seek to

establish is contrary to the divine instruction for the man to leave father and mother and be “united to his wife” (Genesis 2:24).

In Jesus’ discussion with the Pharisees, He reiterated the order of sexuality that God established in the beginning: “Haven’t you read . . . that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’” (Matthew 19:4–5). He pointed out that the only alternative to heterosexual marriage is celibacy for the kingdom of heaven’s sake (Matthew 19:10–12).

C. Homosexual behavior is sin that comes under divine judgment.

The name of the ancient city of Sodom¹⁴ has become a synonym for homosexual behavior. While other evils existed in this community, sodomy was prominent. The homosexuals of Sodom were so depraved that they threatened homosexual rape of Lot’s guests. “Bring them [“the men who came to you”] out to us so that we can have sex¹⁵ with them,” Lot was told (Genesis 19:5). The biblical record indicates that the mob became violent and tried to break down the door of Lot’s house. Only divine intervention spared Lot and his household from their evil intentions, and God subsequently destroyed both Sodom and the neighboring city of Gomorrah (Genesis 19:4–11, 24–25).

God’s punishment of these cities was of such severity that it is used as an illustration of divine judgment by both Peter (2 Peter 2:6) and Jude (7). Jude’s commentary is particularly apt, “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.”

The Book of Judges (19:1–30) records an incident in the ancient Benjaminite city of Gibeah that has many similarities to the sin of Sodom. Certain “wicked men of the city” (19:22) sought to force a visiting Levite male into homosexual acts¹⁶ with them. Denied their insistent requests, the attackers finally settled for vicious sexual abuse and gangrape¹⁷ of the Levite’s concubine that resulted in her death (19:25–30). The other tribes of Israel found the crime so repugnant that when the tribe of Benjamin refused to surrender the offenders, they eventually went to war—decimating the Benjamites (20:1–48).

These are particularly notorious examples of homosexual expression that undoubtedly most homosexual persons today would repudiate. It should be understood that while expressing abhorrence at such rapacious perversion, the biblical writers do not imply that heterosexuals are not capable of sexual atrocities nor that most homosexuals are as depraved as the residents of those ancient cities. Nor should modern Christians draw those implications. It is important to note,

however, that wherever homosexuality occurs in the biblical record it is an occasion of scandal and judgment. Homosexuality is never viewed in a positive light.

The biblical writers make it clear that practicing homosexuals, along with sexually immoral heterosexuals and all other unrepentant sinners, will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Paul also described homosexual conduct as one evidence of God’s judgment for humankind’s corporate rebellion against Him (Romans 1:26–27). Jesus himself was explicit that at the end of the age “the Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:40–42).

II. Homosexual Behavior Is Sin for Which Reconciliation Is Possible

While Scripture makes it clear homosexual behavior is sin and comes under the judgment of God, it also indicates that those who are guilty of homosexual behavior or any other sin can be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:17–21).

In the church at Corinth were former homosexuals who had been delivered from the power of sin by the grace of God. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, Paul listed homosexuals along with immoral heterosexuals as those who cannot inherit the kingdom of God. His grammar implies continuing sexually immoral activity until their conversion.

Verse 11 follows with a powerful contrast, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” They had been homosexuals in orientation and behavior, but now the power of God’s Spirit had radically transformed their lives, and the lives of their fellow heterosexual sinners.

Scripture makes clear that the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ is unlimited for those who accept it. There is no sin, sexual or otherwise, that cannot be cleansed. John the Baptist announced, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

The apostle Paul wrote, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The apostle John wrote, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, people, regardless of the nature of their sin, can be made new creations in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). God’s plan of salvation is the same for all. The practicing homosexual who wants to be delivered from the penalty and power of sin must come to God in the same way all

heterosexual sinners must come to God, in the same way all who are now His children have come for deliverance from their sins.

The act of turning to God for salvation includes both repentance and faith. Jesus is both Savior and Lord. He is the one who forgives our sin as we believe in Him and repent. Repentance represents a change of mind in which there is a turning from sin in both attitude and behavior.

Jesus is also the One whose lordship we affirm in holy living. “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God” (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5).

Like the Philippian jailer who asked what he had to do to be saved, those desiring salvation must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:30–31)—believe that He can save from the power as well as the penalty of sin. Obedient faith, like repentance, is a condition of salvation.

III. Resultant Affirmations

In view of the clear biblical teachings on homosexuality and the application of these teachings to contemporary sexual practices, Bethel Family Worship Center makes the following affirmations:

A. With Regard to Same-Sex Marriage

Bethel Family Worship Center defines marriage as the permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, and conjugal “one flesh” union of one man and one woman, intrinsically ordered to procreation and biological family, and in furtherance of the moral, spiritual, and public good of binding father, mother, and child. (Genesis 1:27–28; 2:18–24; Matthew 19:4–9; Mark 10:5–9; Ephesians 5:31–33).

B. With Regard to Sexual Immorality

Bethel Family Worship Center of God believes that sexual acts outside of marriage are prohibited as sinful. Sexual acts outside of marriage include but are not limited to adultery, fornication, incest, bestiality, pornography, prostitution, voyeurism, pedophilia, exhibitionism, sodomy, polygamy, polyamory, or same-sex sexual acts. (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:7–23; 20:10–21; Deuteronomy 5:18; Matthew 5:27–28; 15:19; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–13; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:17–19; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 13:4).

C. With Regard to Sexual Identity

Bethel Family Worship Center believes that God created humankind in His image: male (man) and female (woman), sexually different but with equal personal dignity. The Fellowship supports the dignity of individual persons affirming their biological sex and discouraging any and all attempts to physically change, alter, or disagree with their predominant biological sex—including but not limited to elective sex-reassignment, transvestite, transgender, or nonbinary “genderqueer” acts or conduct. (Genesis 1:26–28; Romans 1:26–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

D. With Regard to Sexual Orientation

Bethel Family Worship Center affirms the sexual complementarity of man and woman and teaches that any and all same-sex sexual attractions are to be resisted. Consequently, believers are to refrain from any and all same-sex sexual acts or conduct, which are intrinsically disordered. (Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6; Mark 10:5–9; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

IV. A Word to the Church

Bethel Family Worship Center believes that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and should seek redemption through confession, repentance, baptism, and faith in Jesus Christ. Our Fellowship welcomes and treats with respect, compassion, and sensitivity all who experience same-sex attractions or confess sexually immoral acts and are committed to resisting sexual temptation, refraining from sexual immorality, and transforming their behavior in the light of biblical teachings. (Matthew 11:28–30; Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Ephesians 2:1–10; Hebrews 2:17–18; 4:14–16)

Believers who struggle with homosexual temptations and sexual identity confusion must be encouraged and strengthened by fellow Christians (Galatians 6:1–2). Likewise, they should be taught that while temptation to sinful behaviors is universal, temptation itself is not sin. Temptation can be resisted and overcome (1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 12:1–6).

The moral imperatives of Scripture are incumbent upon all persons. However, believers should not be surprised that unbelievers do not honor God and do not recognize the Bible as a rightful claim on their lives and conduct (1 Corinthians 1:18). Peter writes clearly of the conflict and contrast between believer and unbeliever in his first letter:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable

idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:1–5).

As Christians we must both exhort believers to live in moral purity and express in word and deed Christ's love for the lost. Aware of the claims of God on every aspect of our lives, we must emphasize that we are called to holiness. To unbelievers we must reach out with compassion and humility. We must hold no malice toward, or fear of, homosexuals and those struggling with sexual identity—such attitudes are not of Christ. At the same time we must not condone sexual behavior, homosexual or heterosexual, that God has defined as sinful.

Christians should also do all they can to assist the person who has struggled with homosexual behaviors and desires to change and find deliverance. Change is not always easy but it is possible. It may require the help of others in the body of Christ, such as counselors and pastors, as well as a supportive church fellowship. Christian organizations are also available to help those who seek to change their lifestyles.

We desire all to be reconciled to God—to experience the peace and joy that stems from the forgiveness of sin through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. God does not want any to perish in their sins; He invites all to accept His offer of eternal life (John 3:16). As part of His church, we issue that invitation to life in Christ to everyone.

NOTES

1 The term homosexuality is frequently used to describe both orientation and behavior. In this paper, homosexual orientation is understood to mean sexual attraction to other members of the same sex. Homosexual behavior is understood to mean participation in sexual activity with another of the same sex. Homosexual orientation may pose temptations to lustful thinking and behavior, like heterosexual temptations, that are not necessarily acted upon and that may be resisted and overcome in the power of the Holy Spirit. Only homosexual lust and homosexual behaviors are understood in this study to be sinful.

2 Some sexual preference groups may prefer a different designation but, in the absence of a universally agreed-upon term, LGBT, generally understood in contemporary circles, is used here to include all “nonstraight” communities.”

3 All biblical citations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

4 Here meaning to refrain from illicit sexual activity.

5 Here meaning sexual faithfulness and exclusivity in marriage.

6 The Hebrew word found here, to'ebah, is also used in this chapter of Leviticus for various abominable sexual practices of Israel's pagan neighbors (18:26–27, 29–30). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, it denotes such repugnant practices as idolatry,

human sacrifice, and witchcraft. See R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:976–77. It is not uncommon for revisionists to attempt to explain away the plain meaning of the text by assuming the homosexual acts to be judged wrong only because they were associated with pagan religious practices forbidden to Israel. However, nothing in the passages cited supports this interpretation and the fact that homosexual practice is implicitly or explicitly condemned wherever it appears in the biblical text negates this interpretation.

7 “[N]atural intercourse,” New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); Greek chresis has to do with sexual intercourse in such contexts. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, revised and edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1089.

8 Ibid.

9 Greek aschemosyne, “shameless deed.” See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 147.

10 It is important to note that Scripture is even-handed in condemning heterosexual sins as well. Along with homosexuality, the apostle Paul includes such heterosexual sins as adultery, fornication, and prostitution. (See also such passages as Galatians 5:19–21 and 1 Timothy 1:10.) Bethel Family Worship Center stands against all sexual immorality, heterosexual or homosexual, and calls all participants to repentance.

11 “[M]ale prostitutes” is translated from the Greek plural of malakos; “homosexual offenders” is translated from the plural of arsenokoites. The terms are defined respectively as “the passive male partner in sexual intercourse” and “the male partner in sexual intercourse” in Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd edition (New York: United Bible Societies; 1988, 1989) 1:772. See also the respective entries in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

12 Plural of arsenokoites.

13 New American Standard Bible.

14 Some modern interpreters claim that Sodom was condemned in Scripture only for its general wickedness, not for a reputation of pervasive homosexual behavior. They also conclude from Hebrews 13:2 (“some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”) and Matthew 10:14–15 (“shake the dust off your feet”) that the sin of Sodom was nothing more than inhospitality. It is further claimed that even if the references to Sodom describe homosexual behavior, it is actually male rape, not consensual homosexual relations, that are denounced. While the Genesis account does not answer all our questions, it is clear from the story itself and the many references in both Testaments that promiscuous and violent homosexuality is in view.

15 “[H]ave sex” is in this context an accurate translation of the Hebrew yada’, which

means “to know” but is frequently used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Genesis 4:1, NRSV). The word is also used to denote sodomy (Genesis 19:5; Judges 19:22) and rape (Judges 19:25). See Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, 1:366.

16 Hebrew *yada'*. See previous note.

17 Hebrew *yada'*. See previous notes.