

# **One Flesh: Sexuality, Scripture, and the Church**

Session 3 - Homosexuality, Scripture, and the Church:  
Two Views

# Review

- Session 1: An exploration of different worldviews concerning sex
- Session 2: A look at different views of marriage - the prevailing view vs. the historic Christian view
- Session 3: The presenting questions surrounding the Bible and homosexuality

# Six key biblical passages concerning same sex relations

- Genesis 19 - Sodom and Gomorrah
- Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13 - Holiness code
- Romans 1:26-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- 1 Timothy 1:9-10

# Genesis 19

- Where the term *sodomy* comes from
- Sodom often seen as the first gay city
- But does this passage add much to the discussion about loving, consensual, monogamous gay sex?
- This is primarily a story about violence, gang rape, though there is a connection to same sex practice in NT
- Whenever rest of OT refers to Sodom, homosexual sex is never mentioned.
- Ezekiel 16:49 - “This was the guilt of Sodom..pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”
- Other references: Isaiah 1:10-17; Isaiah 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14; Lamentations 4:6; Matthew 10:5-10
- NT - Jude 7 - Sodom and Gomorrah engaged in “sexual immorality” and “pursued unnatural lust”

# Leviticus 18 and 20

- “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” (18:22)
- “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death. Their blood is on their own heads.” (20:13)
- Two questions:
  - Do these verses prohibit all forms of homosexual acts or just certain exploitive forms of it?
  - Do these verses still carry authority for Christians today?

# All Types of Same Sex Relations?

- Some argue that these two verses are only talking about things like rape, temple prostitution, or pederasty
- The commands do not come with any qualifications, comments or specifications that would limit them to a particular type of same sex behavior, however
- Indeed, they appear to include same sex acts that are mutual and consensual—both partners are deemed guilty
- If they were about exploitation, only the one doing the violence would be guilty

# Cultic Prostitution?

- Some argue that Leviticus 18 and 20 only prohibit male cult prostitutes who service other men in devotion to a pagan god
- Nothing in the context suggests this, however, and many scholars now agree that cultic prostitution in the ancient world was not as common as assumed

# Feminization of the Passive Partner?

- This view agrees that both passages forbid all forms of male-male sex, but the reason is that it feminizes the passive partner
- This view points out that Israelite culture had a high view of men and a low view of women, so to treat another man like a woman was to strip him of male honor. Should we still follow commands with all the chauvinism that shaped them?
- Counter: Both passages highlight gender distinctions, but nothing in either passage assumes a low view of women

# In Summary

- Leviticus 18 and 20 do not appear to have a specific form of male-male sex in view
- Uses general language, including all forms

# Are Leviticus 18 and 20 still authoritative for Christians?

- One view: There are lot of laws in Leviticus that no one follows anymore (eating shellfish, sowing fields with one type of seed, clothes with mixed fibers, eating pork, tattoos, Sabbath observance, etc.)
- Jesus fulfilled the law, therefore it is no longer binding on Christians

# Some things to consider...

- Leviticus 18-20 is one literary unit - the “holiness code”
- Almost every law within it is still relevant for Christians (esp. 19:18 - “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”)
- Some laws are fulfilled in Christ (like the sacrificial laws in 19:21-22), others seem bound by specific culture (beards, fabrics)
- Sexual laws - most still binding (incest, adultery, bestiality) - menstruation? (18:19)

# The New Testament Test

- The most fail-proof test to see if an OT law is still valid for Christians is if it's repeated in the NT
- Food laws - OT outlaws pork, but NT says Christians no longer need obey this law (Acts 10)
- Gentile inclusion - circumcision not required. But avoidance of sexual immorality still required (Acts 15)
- When it comes to prohibitions against same sex intercourse, this command is repeated in the NT

# **The New Testament View**

# Some historical background

- The term “homosexuality” did not come into use until the 19th century
- In the ancient Near East and in the Roman world, having sex with some of the same sex did not automatically mean someone was gay. What mattered was masculinity and femininity (gender roles)
- Homosexual practice was acceptable so long as it followed a particular social protocol

# Some historical background

- Acceptable forms in the ancient world: “Active” partner (high social status) vs. “Passive” partner (lower social status)
- Examples: Warrior/Enemy, Master/Slave, Older male/young boy (pederasty)
- If a man penetrated another man of equal status, however, that would have been unacceptable

# Sexual orientation in the ancient world

- One view: If people in the ancient world (like Paul) knew what we know about sexual orientation, then perhaps they would have made an exception to their negative talk about same sex behavior
- And yet, there is evidence that some Greco-Roman writers did believe in some inborn form of same sex desires
- Aristotle (4th c. BC) - some homoerotic desires come from habit, some from nature
- Parmenides (5th c. BC) - believed men who desired to be penetrated were “generated in the act of conception”
- Others believed sexual orientation was fixed by the stars (fate)

# Bernadette Brooten

- Affirming scholar
- “Contrary to the view that the idea of sexual orientation did not develop until the 19th century, the astrological sources demonstrate the existence in the Roman world of the concept of a lifelong erotic orientation.”
- It is thus historically inaccurate to say that the notion of sexual orientation was absent during the time the New Testament was written

# Sexual practice in the ancient world

- One view: Some affirming scholars argue that there was no such thing as loving same-sex relations in Paul's day and therefore he could not have been addressing those in his writings - Paul cannot condemn something that did not exist
- Indeed, most same sex relations in the Roman world took place within some sort of power differential
- There was a spectrum, however, and on the other side of that spectrum existed loving, consensual, even marital-equivalent unions between couples of the same sex

# Same Sex Relationships in the Roman world

- Pederasty was the most common form - beardless teenagers were considered the purest form of maleness
- Prostitution another common form
- But other forms of consensual same sex relations between social equals existed
  - Xenophon (2nd c. AD) - *An Ephesian Tale*
  - Petronius (1st c. AD) - *Satyricon*
  - Juvenal (Late 1st/Early 2nd c. AD) - *Satires*

# Judaism on Same Sex Relations

- Christianity was birthed out of Judaism - considered a Jewish sect
- Letter of Aristeas (100 years before Christ) - “We Jews are quite separated from these practices”
- Jews on either side of the time of Jesus continued to interpret same sex relations as outside of God’s will
- Lack of procreation was one of several reasons which included blurring gender distinctions. Most important reason was, essentially, “God said so.”
- “If we say that Christians should endorse same sex relations, then we will need to recreate a rather un-Jewish Jesus and an un-Jewish New Testament.” - Preston Sprinkle
- To depart from the Jewish context in regard to same sex relations, the New Testament would have to make a clear break. It does not.

# Romans 1 - The Key Passage

- A letter written to a community consisting of both Jewish and Gentile Christians - designed to draw them together in Christ
- Romans 1-3 is not primarily about homosexuality, but about the entire human condition under sin (1:18-3:26)
- All people are sinners under God's wrath—something we have chosen for ourselves (1:19-23)
- There is no room for moral pride in anyone—all our orientations are disoriented

# Romans 1:24-27

# Same Sex Relations in Romans 1:26-27

- Three points:
  - The language of mutuality
  - God's design in creation
  - “Against nature”

# The Language of Mutuality

- Paul considers both parties involved in the sex act to be doing something wrong
- The inclusion of female same sex practice is instructive - it did not have the power dynamics of other male same sex practices
- When Paul parallels female same sex relations with male, it would seem that Paul is talking about consensual same sex acts between equals
- If Paul had meant pederasty or another form, there were words he could have used to describe that specifically
- Instead, the language is all-inclusive and is mutual - doesn't single out the active partner, nor domination. Both parties responsible

# Historical agreement

- “Paul’s words in Romans 1:26-27 included, but were by no means limited to exploitive pederasty, sexual abuse of male slaves, or same sex acts...performed within idolatrous ritual contexts.” - William Loader
- “Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of the period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian.” - Louis Crompton

# God's Design in Creation

- Paul goes back to Genesis (1:20, 1:25)
- Uses specific terms to describe men and women, calling attention to the male/female design in creation
- Paul considers same sex relations to be a departure from God's intention in creation (the same intention affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19)
- This is consistent with Judaism, where same sex relations were not a matter of debate

# Exchanging the Glory

- Paul pens Romans 1:23 with an eye toward Genesis 1:26
- Instead of worshipping God by ruling over the earth, people have idolized the things of the earth and turned their backs on their Creator
- This includes departing from God's design for them as gendered humans
- This is not limited to a cultural way of behaving—Paul sees the prohibition as transcending human cultures

# “Against Nature”

- *para physin*
- Affirming view: Paul thinks same sex relations are wrong because they cannot procreate.
- If so, this would condemn a lot of other forms of sex that practice birth control. *Para physin* thus refers to any non-procreative sex
- But Paul never says that homosexual sex is “unnatural” because it cannot procreate. In fact, when Paul discusses marriage and sex he never mentions procreation. Thus this is probably not what Paul thinks *para physin* means. It is the same sex act itself that is in view as being *para physin*.

# “Against culture”

- Affirming view: *para physin* means against the way Paul’s culture expects people to act.
- Brownson: Loaded with Paul’s misogynist assumptions about women - when a man acts like a mere woman, *that* is what is “unnatural”
- Assumption: Paul’s assumptions about the inferiority of women should not be observed today.
- In some texts, Paul does seem to imply inferiority - I Timothy 2:11-15
- But in other texts, Paul seems to have had a rather high view of women —“coworkers,” deacons, prophets, patrons - Junia “apostle” (Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 7:3-5)
- Again, Paul’s inclusion of female same sex relationships in Romans 1 would seem to preclude this view— not about inferiority but about mutual responsibility

# The Gentile Argument

- Romans 11:24 - “For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature (*para physin*), into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.”
- God’s grafting of the Gentiles in is *para physin*, so why would we not see God grafting in same sex marriage in the same way?
- Context is everything here. In 11:24, “nature” has nothing to do with innate desires or social conventions, but with the organic unity of branches and the tree from which they originally sprouted
- What is “contrary to nature” is the circumvention of natural processes of growth with artificial intervention. It is uncommon, but there is no ethical judgment as in 1:26, 27. It’s a gardening act, not a sexual act.
- Both Jews and Gentiles are olive branches—not trying to fit together two discordant entities (unlike 1:26, 27)

# *Para physin*

- When the phrase is used in reference to sex, however, there is wide agreement in both biblical and extra-biblical sources
- Generally reserved by ancient writers for same sex erotic behavior
- “In Paul’s time the categorization of homosexual practices as *para physin* was a commonplace feature of polemical attacks against such behavior, particularly in the world of Hellenistic Judaism. Paul is hardly making an original contribution to theological thought on the subject.” - Richard Hays

# Excessive Lust?

- Affirming view: Paul is not critiquing all same sex relations, only those that result from excessive lust and uncontrollable passions; therefore, Romans 1 does not apply to loving, consensual, non-lustful same sex marriages.
- View of Vines, Brownson, and others
- Many Greco-Roman writers believed that same sex eroticism was the byproduct of excessive lust—but not all writers believed this.

# Excessive Lust and Romans 1

- The excessive lust view does not work for Paul's critique of female same sex relations in 1:26
- Greco-Romans writers who used lust as a basis for arguments against male-male intercourse did not use the same argument for female same sex relations—and yet Paul still says these relationships are “against nature”
- Indeed, “against nature” does not help the “excessive lust” view. Everything we have observed about *para physin* above would have to be refuted
- It is not excess desire that Paul condemns, it is the actions that result from sexual desire.

# An important caveat

- Paul doesn't write this chapter to condemn gay people. He writes it to condemn all people! It is a "homiletical sting operation" (Richard Hays)
- Reading Romans 1 without reading Romans 2–3 is irresponsible - it's about the destructive nature of human sin and the scandalous, redemptive power of God's grace
- It also includes a treatise on how we should treat one another: as fellow sinners in need of redemption, we are to treat one another as God treats us: with "kindness leading to repentance" (2:4)

**“Until we find our own self-worth in Jesus, cling to his righteousness and not our own, pry every log from our eyes right down to the last splinter, assault every species of judgmentalism and hypocrisy lurking in the corners of our pharisaic hearts, trumpet the majesty of the cross and the triumph of the vacant tomb above all our good deeds—which are byproducts of God’s grace, though salted with our own sin—and pummel the insidious notion that we straight people are closer to God than ‘those’ gay people over there—  
—Preston Sprinkle, People to Be Loved  
until we do those things, we will never view homosexuality the way God does.”**

# 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

- Subject of massive scholarly debate
- Comes down to translation of what Paul means by the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoites*
- Connects to Septuagint translation of Leviticus 18 and 20
- Consistent with Paul's assertions in Romans 1

# In Summary: The Biblical Witness

- Wherever Scripture mentions same sex sexual relations, it always prohibits them.
- There is no diversity in Scripture about whether same-sex sexual behavior is ever affirmed.
- And yet, same sex sexual behavior is not a major biblical topic (only 6 explicit mentions)—it is subsumed within the larger framework of humanity's sexual brokenness and sin. It is, in other words, not a greater sin than any other.

# Ethical Diversity in the Bible

- It is rare to see such uniformity when it comes to biblical doctrine
  - Women teaching/leading - Deborah, prophetess, Romans 16
  - Election: Did God choose you or did you choose God?
  - Slavery: Bible used to both affirm and condemn
  - Pacifism: Kill or love your enemies
- We must pay attention to the “trajectory” of Scripture
- Biblical arguments and debates abound, but when the Bible speaks about same sex relations it is univocal

# What about Jesus?

- Jesus doesn't specifically address same sex relations
- We would not expect him to, given his Jewish background
- The argument from silence is problematic
- When Jesus does speak about sex, it is always within the context of Genesis 1-2 and the one flesh union of male and female
- And yet, Jesus did say a lot about how we are to relate to and be in ministry with all persons. We will look at that next week.

# Living Within the Story

- Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*
- Describes living as a gay Christian who has chosen to live a celibate life in accordance with the Scriptures

# Living Within the Story

- The Christian story promises *forgiveness of sins* to anyone who will receive it through Jesus' death and resurrection
- God challenges, threatens, endangers, and transforms *all* of our natural desires and affections
- The Christian story proclaims that our bodies belong to God and have become members of the corporate, communal body of Christ
- The Christian story commends long-suffering endurance as a participation in the sufferings of Christ

# Other Arguments

# The Argument from Orientation

- Affirming view: Gay people do not choose their attractions, thus to limit their ability to have same sex marriage is harmful to them.
- But should inborn desires justify behavior? Biological determinism does not work for many behaviors.
- We may not choose our attractions but we do choose our behavior.

**“Just because an attraction or drive is biological doesn’t mean that it’s okay to act on...We all have inborn tendencies to sin in any number of ways. If gay people’s same-sex attractions were inborn, that wouldn’t necessarily mean it’s okay to act on them, and if we all agreed that gay sex is sinful, that wouldn’t necessarily mean that same-sex attractions aren’t inborn. ‘Is it a sin?’ and ‘Does it have biological roots’ are two completely separate questions.”**

# What does the science tell us?

- There seems to be fluidity in sexual attraction across a spectrum
- Most scientists believe that orientation is a complex blend of nature and nurture.
- “No findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles.” - APA
- While genetics “does play a role,” it is “impossible to use genes to predict someone’s sexuality.” - Belluck, Pam. “Many genes influence same-sex sexuality, not a single ‘Gay Gene.’” *New York Times*, August 29, 2019.

# The Harm Argument

- “Condemning same sex relationships is harmful to LGBTQ people. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that good trees bear good fruit, but the church’s rejection of same-sex relationships has caused tremendous, needless suffering to LGBT people.” - Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*
- It is true that the Christian community has caused harm to the gay community. But is it the church’s traditional *theology* that causes harm, or is it the way the church has treated people in practice? Correlation does not always equal causation
- Assumes cultural view that sexual fulfillment is key to human flourishing

# An Important Study

- Andrew Marin - *Us vs. Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT People*
- Survey of 1,712 LGBT persons, at least 21 from every state
- 20,000 qualitative results examined by independent auditors (one an atheist LGBT activist, the other a conservative Christian psychologist)

# Findings

- 83% of LGBT people were raised in the church
- 51% left their faith community after age 18 (43% overall leave after age 18)
- 3% said they left primarily because of the church's belief that same sex marriage was wrong
- 97% said it had to do with relationships
  - Not feeling safe (18%)
  - Relational disconnect with leaders (14%)
  - Incongruence between teaching and practice (13%)
  - Unwillingness to dialogue (12%)
  - Kicked out (9%)

# Openness to Return

- 76% of LGBT people who left the church are open to returning as long as the church makes some changes
- Only 8% said that the church would need to change their theology of marriage for them to return. Most would return to a traditional church, not an affirming church
- Things the church would need to change
  - Feeling loved (12%)
  - Given time (9%)
  - No attempts to change sexual orientation (6%)
  - Authenticity (5%)
  - Support of family and friends (4%)

# Conclusion from the study

- It's not the church's *theology* that's driven LGBT people away—by their own admission. It's been the church's lack of love and care, its *posture*.
- Regardless of position, the church has some repentance and correction to undertake in order to reconnect with the LGBT community

# “Love is Love”

- If God is love, why would God be opposed to loving relationships between same sex partners?
- We can't help who we love, therefore, love being the higher law, we should affirm love wherever we find it
- This view assumes a vision of love that is vague. Biblically speaking, Jesus affirms the higher law as love for God and love for neighbor. Love for God includes obedience as an act of the will (“If you love me, you will do what I command”)
- When we prioritize *eros* over *agape*, we prioritize feeling over faith

# In conclusion...

- We must be willing to do the hard work of searching the Scriptures in community when it comes to ethics. Proof-texting and sloganeering will not do.
- We must recognize the ways in which Scripture challenges all of our perceptions, orientations, and desires
- If all Scripture points to Jesus, then our living out of biblical ethics will reflect the way of Jesus both in our position and our posture

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