

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



What does the bible teach about homosexuality?

– Dr. Stephen D. Jones*

Many people assume from the severe arguments heard in the church today about homosexuality that it is an important issue in the Bible. Many people assume that the Bible teaches something definitive about homosexuality. And others assume that homosexuality is condemned throughout the Bible “cover to cover.” None of these statements are true. Allow me to explain why.

First, the Bible barely mentions homosexuality, even though it was prominent in the Roman and Greek culture surrounding Israel. Jesus grew up in Nazareth and there was a Roman/Greek city, Sepphoris, but three miles away. And in Sepphoris, there were Roman baths and Greek gyms and temples and it is likely that homosexual behaviors were practiced in such places. However, according to the four Gospels, Jesus never teaches or mentions homosexuality, not by direct reference and not by indirect inference. Not once! This is an amazing fact, given the priority the church gives to homosexuality today. In the entire Bible, there are only 5-6 references to homosexuality.

Second, in none of these passages where homosexuality is mentioned is it the main teaching. It is always a part of a larger teaching.

Third, all of these isolated texts about homosexuality are “troubled texts,” meaning, the message isn’t clear and the text requires deeper interpretation.

Fourth, our modern view of homosexuality isn’t shared with those who lived in biblical times. It wasn’t until the 20th Century that we came to understand homosexuality as an orientation, more than mere same-sex behavior. The Bible doesn’t understand that some people have a primary attraction to their own gender, while others are attracted to the opposite gender. So, to the question, “Does the Bible condemn homosexuals?”, we would have to answer, “The Bible doesn’t address this question as it doesn’t recognize homosexuals.” And to the question, “Does the Bible condemn monogamous homosexual partners or marriage?”, again, the answer would be the same. So, the Bible doesn’t directly answer the most pressing questions we have about homosexuality. This requires deeper interpretation.

Fifth, Jesus does embrace two sexual minorities of his day. One such group was the eunuchs, or men who were unable to perform sexually and/or were castrated. As such, they were outcasts from the community of faith (Lev. 17:17; Deut. 23:1) and yet in Isaiah 56:1-8 (“To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give them an everlasting name”) and in Matthew 19:7-12 (“There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.”) and also Acts 8:26-40, it is clear that there is a minority view on these sexual outcasts and Jesus embraces that view. Jesus also embraced prostitutes, another sexual minority: “Truly the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” (Mt 21:31; also Luke 7:36-50)

Sixth, it is extremely difficult to take a moral issue from the Bible and apply it literally today. Slavery is the prime example. The Bible urges slave owners to be fair, but it never condemns or questions the institution of slavery. As a society, we do not agree with the Bible. Our sense of

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justice today declares slavery to be fundamentally evil. Read Deuteronomy 25:11f. and try to translate that literally into our society!

Seventh, Jesus and Paul condemn judgmentalism (Mt. 7:1-5; Romans 2:1; Romans 14:4-13). We must take care that we not judge people today. The church has often been very judgmental and cruel toward homosexuals. Jesus advocated a love ethic and we must each apply this love ethic to our values today.

Eighth, there is no single sexual ethic or morality in the Bible. In some places, the Bible allows for polygamy and concubinage and endogamy (marriage within one's ethnic or racial group only). See Deut. 25: 5-10. Social regulations regarding adultery, incest, rape and prostitution are far different than our standards today. Patriarchal relationships between men and women were assumed throughout much of the Bible. And yet, Jesus lifted up women and celebrated their intelligence. Written over thousands of years, the Bible's sexual ethics are varied and evolving.

A Quick look at the texts

Given the truths above, even so, it is important to do a quick overview of the texts where homosexuality is mentioned:

Genesis 19 and Judges 19

This is the story of Sodom and clearly the story has little to do with homosexuality but rather with cruel hospitality in which the men of the town, supposedly most would have been heterosexual, desired to gang rape Lot's guests. Look at Ezekiel 16:49-50 to see what the Bible says was the sin of Sodom. Look at Luke 10:10-13 to see how Jesus equates the sin of Sodom with inhospitality.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

How could there be a more clear condemnation of homosexuality? There is a long explanation that the word, abomination, was a technical cultic term that meant ritually unclean, such as mixed cloth, pork, and intercourse with menstruating women. The real problem, however, with the Levitical Code is that we are unwilling to live by all of it today. Therefore, how can we lift these two verses out of their context and call them prescriptive today? Are you ready to put anyone to death who blasphemes the name of the Lord (Lev. 24:16)? Are you ready to condemn anyone who rounds off the hair on his temples or mars the edges of his beard (19:27)? Are you ready to declare anything a woman sits upon for seven days after her menstrual cycle unclean (15:20)? Are you ready to condemn anyone who is lame or blind (21:18f)?

Romans 1

Temple Prostitution is condemned throughout the Bible. This was a common practice in the Greek and pagan temples surrounding Israel in which men would enter a temple, have intercourse with a female or boy prostitute and thereby experience union with the gods. Cultic prostitution was common among Israel's neighbors. Sometimes these practices drifted into the Jewish temple and were condemned (I Kings 14:24; I Kings 15:12; I Kings 22:43f., II Kings 23:7f., Deuteronomy 23:17-18). Knowing of this practice, when Romans 1 mentions "they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:24-25) it places this text in the context of pagan temple prostitution. Moreover, in the list of 21 sins found in Romans

1:28-31, not one identifies homosexuality. This is strange if this is the primary teaching of Romans 1. I would suggest looking on to Romans 2:1 to discover the primary thrust of this text.

I Corinthians 6:9-11 and I Timothy 1:9-10

There are three Greek words that sometimes get translated to condemn homosexuals, but the words are difficult to interpret. Malakoi means soft, and it could be effeminate. But the truth is, we can't be certain of its meaning. Arsenokoitai is even more uncertain as this is the earliest use of the word in all of Greek literature. Does it refer to men having intercourse with men? Or a man serving as a prostitute for women? Or male prostitutes in cultic temple practices? Pornoi could refer to sexual sin in general or it could refer to male prostitutes.

We are left to Interpretation

It is possible to interpret the Bible as condemning all homosexual behavior. But it is also legitimate to reach another conclusion. We must interpret the Bible according to the dictates of our own wisdom and conscience and according to the leading of God's Spirit in our lives. We must not impose an interpretation on others.

Let me say in closing that I believe in applying justice and equality to the issue of sexuality. In other words, the same standards that we apply to heterosexuals should also be applied to homosexuals. If we allow monogamous relationships for heterosexuals, then how can we, in the name of justice and equality, deny the same relationships to homosexuals?

Our sexuality is God-given and it is one of the most beautiful features of human beings. We are sexual beings. We rob that gift of dignity when we use sex as a tool of manipulation, violence or subjugation. We celebrate that gift when we practice our sexuality in mutual, affirming, committed and wholesome ways. I believe in the same sexual ethic for gays and straights. And I believe that we can all be proud of the gift of sexuality God has given us: heterosexuals, gays, lesbians, transgendered and bisexuals.