

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE

By Bill Counts

Over the last thirty years homosexuality has become a lightning rod issue in American society and the church in general. For years the Episcopal Church held together, despite outspoken bishop John Selby Spong's denial of every essential of the Christian faith. He rejected the authority of the Bible, the existence of the Biblical God, the deity, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the existence of absolute morality. But the day Episcopalians ordained as bishop Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, a huge uproar resulted and the denomination began to splinter. Though statistical studies indicate that gays and lesbians are probably less than five per cent of the population, their influence is way beyond their numbers and they now exercise significant political clout.

The evangelical church is not immune. Some evangelicals have come out of the closet and proudly proclaimed their new identity. Other evangelicals, who may oppose the gay life style, have nevertheless seen mates, adult children, relatives, or close friends come out of the closet as well and are searching for how to deal with it. Gay and lesbian Christians and their sympathizers have published books, papers, and pamphlets defending their views. This study seeks to examine the major biblical passages on homosexuality and clarify the biblical position.

GENESIS 19—SODOM AND GOMORRAH

The purpose of Genesis 19 is to portray forcefully and graphically the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah and etch it forever in Israel's memory. The account clearly accomplishes this, for subsequent Scriptures, including the New Testament, mention Sodom over twenty-five times, almost always making it a byword for evil. The word "sodomy," is used also in the English language generally with a negative overtone.

In the account, Lot, a resident of Sodom, extends hospitality to two angels, disguised as visiting strangers. The men of the city gather at Lot's door and demand that he bring the men out that they may "have sex with them" (Genesis 19:5). The NIV chooses this translation of the Hebrew word "know" because it is a euphemism for sexual intercourse and is so used in verse 8 and passages like Genesis 4:1. That Lot would offer his virgin daughters to the crowd instead of the men confirms this interpretation.

Some interpreters minimize the sexual element of the account by focusing on how the Sodomites tried to force Lot to violate an ancient Bedouin custom, which dictated that a host must protect any guest under his roof at all costs. But this Bedouin rule was cultural, not biblical, and Lot's willingness to have his own daughters raped in order to keep the rule certainly does not reflect a biblical viewpoint. A city would hardly be consigned to ashes and become a notorious example of evil throughout the Bible simply because it violated ancient laws of hospitality.

What the text pictures is a potentially violent homosexual gang rape. Though Ezekiel 16 portrays other sins of Sodom, the chilling Genesis account describes what Sodom is most notorious for. However, while the passage explicitly condemns such violent gang rape, it does not as explicitly condemn homosexuality in general and certainly the author of Genesis would have condemned heterosexual gang rape as well. But if other Scriptures condemn homosexuality, the passage would emphasize that Sodom's sin not only involved gang rape, but *homosexual* gang rape, which was even worse because one sin was added to another.

LEVITICUS 18 AND 20

The books of Exodus through Deuteronomy contain what we might call ancient Israel's legal code. Of course, a stark difference between this legal code and most modern legal codes is the religious element. The Israeli legal code also intermixes the criminal, moral, religious, and civil in ways that would frustrate any modern attorney. Leviticus 18 sets forth mostly sexual crimes, including incest (6-18), adultery (20), and bestiality (sex with animals 23), as well as child sacrifice (21). Leviticus 20 adds the penalties for such violations, frequently capital punishment. In the middle of this list of crimes, Leviticus 18:22 states, "*Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.*"

The Hebrew word for "detestable," used five times in this chapter and well over one hundred times in the Old Testament, means what is hateful or abhorrent, often to God. Though the word may describe ritual violations, usually it describes spiritually or morally offensive behavior. Deuteronomy 18:9-12 uses the word to denounce child sacrifice and occultism. Proverbs uses the word twenty-one times, almost always in a moral sense, as in 15: 9, "The Lord *detests* the way of the wicked" (see also 6:16-19, the seven detestable sins).

It appears inescapable that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 condemn homosexuality. The context of both chapters is primarily moral, not ritual offenses. In Leviticus 18 the verses before prohibit adultery and child sacrifice; the verse after, bestiality. Leviticus 20 applies the death penalty only to the most serious crimes of Leviticus 18. Sleeping with a woman during her period, one of just two ritual violations in the list, brings only excommunication. But the most serious crimes---incest with a close relative, adultery, bestiality, child sacrifice, and homosexuality--- are capital offenses. Leviticus categorically condemns homosexuality and considers it sexual immorality along with incest and adultery---there is no other way to understand these verses.

THE REST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The remainder of the Old Testament says relatively little about homosexuality. Deuteronomy 23:15 and other passages refer to God's condemnation of both male and female religious prostitutes, which may have included homosexuality. But the primary emphasis of such verses is the condemnation of pagan fertility rites. Judges 19 portrays a similar scene in Israel to the Sodom account. The purpose of the passage is also similar—to reveal the depths of degradation to which people had sunk in the days of the Judges. Aside from these references, the Old Testament is virtually silent about homosexuality.

Why is this? The answer seems to be the lack of an active homosexual community in Israel. In this agrarian, patriarchal, many times polygamous society, with its arranged marriages and relatively few single people, where the law officially sentenced homosexuals to death, homosexual activity went underground and probably involved only a fraction of the population. The sins of Israel's kings included idolatry and oppression, but not, like Roman Emperors of later times, homosexuality. The Prophets use sexual images to portray the people's relationship to God, but they are heterosexual images---marriage, adultery, and prostitution. Homosexuality apparently never found fertile soil in ancient Israel, so it is rarely mentioned.

A rough parallel would be American society during the Victorian era. Probably more homosexuality existed then than in ancient Israel. But because American culture condemned it and laws criminalized it, homosexuality was but a blip on the radar screen. As a result, histories of the Victorian era in America or surveys of the novels and poetry of the time make only rare references to homosexuality.

HOW MUCH OF THE OLD TESTAMENT DO WE CARRY OVER?

At this point many gay and lesbians object that the church cherry picks from the Old Testament only what it wants. Churches carry over condemnation of homosexuality, based on Leviticus 18 and 20, but they usually don't demand applying the death penalty to it, nor do they carry over Old Testament rituals and civil laws, many of which appear archaic.

The New Testament teaches that the Law, the legal code of Israel, was abolished in Christ. Whole New Testament books, like Galatians, Hebrews, and much of Romans make this clear. Jesus' followers are under the New Covenant, not the Old, and commanded to plant churches, not to create nations with legal codes, temples, animal sacrifices, and detailed religious rituals. The state churches of Europe suffered confusion here with their attempts to create Christian nations and Christian societies.

Nevertheless, though the New Testament does not bring over the Old Testament legal code, it does bring over spiritual and moral truth from the Old Testament. It calls on the church to obey nine of the Ten Commandments (the exception is the Sabbath day), and carries over the moral core of the Old Testament, including prohibitions of sexual immorality.

THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

Jesus does not directly address homosexuality evidently because it was it was virtually a non-issue to the average Palestinian Jew. But this does not mean Jesus was absolutely silent on the topic. In Mark 7: 21-22 Jesus lists sins that originate from the human heart, including adultery and sexual immorality. The Greek word for sexual immorality here, *porneia*, includes every kind of sexual immorality, and several Greek writers used it of homosexuality. Jesus himself, steeped in the Old Testament, certainly was familiar with Leviticus 18 and 20, and certainly would have included homosexuality in his definition of immorality. Jesus also never addressed the issue of incest, which Leviticus 18 and 20

discuss in much detail, nor pederasty (sex between adult men and young teenage boys), common to Roman Emperors. His silence does not imply approval or indifference. All such sexual practices would be *porneia*. If homosexuality were an exception, it seems Jesus would have said so.

Finally, Jesus also offered profound reflections on human sexuality which have applications to homosexuality. In Matthew 19:1-10 Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question about acceptable reasons for divorce. Instead of cataloguing possible justifications for ending a marriage, Jesus goes back to the creation account:

...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.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate (4-6).

Jesus teaches here that marriage is a permanent sexual bond between *one male and one female*. This principle rules out adultery, polygamy, cohabitation, one night stands, and homosexuality. According to Jesus, The Old Testament permission to divorce was only a concession to the hardness of human hearts (verse 8). God permitted divorce and even polygamy, which was interwoven through ancient culture, but these were never the divine intention. Though God permitted such aberrations, in the Old Testament he expressly prohibited other aberrations like adultery and immorality. Paul will also build on the creation ordinance when he confronts homosexuality in Romans 1. So even though Jesus never explicitly condemned homosexuality, he implicitly undermined its very foundation.

ROMANS 1:26-27

Though homosexuality may have been a non-issue in Israel, it was present and public among gentiles in the Roman Empire. Biblical scholar William Barclay states that fourteen of the first fifteen Roman emperors engaged in homosexual activity. Their particular attraction was to pederasty. The emperor Nero publicly married a young adolescent.

In Romans 1:26-27, as Paul surveys the sins of the pagan gentile world of his day, he disdainfully comments:

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Like the Leviticus passages, the meaning here is inescapable. Paul sees homosexuality as part of the moral corruption resulting from idolatry. His broad description of it goes well beyond ritual prostitution or specialized types of homosexual relationships like pederasty. Paul uses the Greek words for "female" and "male," (which the translators have toned down to "women" and "men") to emphasize the unnaturalness of same sex sexual activity. Though he criticizes male homosexual lust, the thrust of the passage is not a

condemnation of lust, but of homosexuality. Paul's use of the words "natural" and "unnatural" parallel Jewish writings that use the same words to condemn homosexual practices. Paul no doubt has in mind the Genesis account, which Jesus used as well. For Paul, homosexuality violates God's natural created order.

To say that Paul is simply teaching, as some interpreters have tried to do, that a heterosexual person who takes up the gay lifestyle is going against his or her nature while a homosexual person who lives the gay lifestyle is doing what is natural is reading a foreign concept into the passage. Without being informed of such a view, no one would guess it teaches that. The passage stands as a broad and categorical condemnation of every kind of same sex sexual activity.

Paul's approach here also undermines attempts to put the biblical views of slavery, subjugation of women, and homosexuality in the same category. Just as the Bible accepted slavery and subjugation of women as concessions to the cultures of the times, so the argument goes, but the church, now more enlightened, rejects these practices, so in the near future the church will become more enlightened and change its views toward homosexuality. It is true that the Bible moderated the slavery and patriarchy of ancient times without abolishing such institutions, but it never fully embraced these practices. In fact, the creation account, which views every person as uniquely created in God's image, reinforced a sense of equality and implicitly undermined ancient slavery and the subjugation of women.

In contrast, Paul's rejection of homosexuality is not a concession to the prejudices of the times, because many Greeks and Romans accepted homosexuality. He was going against these cultures. Paul wrote Romans from the city of Corinth, where homosexuality flourished. If Paul felt homosexuality were acceptable, this was the ideal time and place to declare it. Instead he does the opposite. Furthermore, Paul uses the creation account to reinforce heterosexuality and undermine homosexuality, not vice versa. So the biblical approaches to slavery, ancient patriarchy, and homosexuality differ markedly.

THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Paul and the other New Testament writers often warn against immorality (*porneia*) in their writings, which, in light of Romans and Leviticus, would have included homosexuality. But Paul makes two other references to homosexuality. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 he condemns "male prostitutes," and "homosexual offenders." The Greek word for "male prostitutes" means "soft." Greek writers used it to describe effeminate men. The Greek word for "homosexual offenders" is almost a coined word by Paul, drawn from the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22. In the context, it seems to mean a male homosexual. Since he pairs the word with that for effeminate men, many Bible scholars feel he is describing the more masculine and feminine partners in a male homosexual relationship.

In 1 Timothy 1:10 he condemns "perverts." The Greek for "perverts" is the same word used for "homosexual offenders" in 1 Corinthians. The word in 1 Timothy seems to refer to a male homosexual and should probably be translated that way. Again, some interpreters try to make the word refer only to homosexual prostitutes. Recent linguistic

research reveals, however, that the Romans, Corinthians, and 1 Timothy passages all reflect word usages from either contemporary Judaism or the Greek Old Testament that condemned homosexuality. This argues against reading more specialized meanings like pederasty or prostitution into these passages.

CONCLUSION

The Bible does not speak at length about homosexuality. But when it does speak, it minces no words. Its condemnations are broad, severe, and categorical. The Bible clearly considers homosexuality a form of *porneia*, sexual immorality. The numerous warnings against *porneia*, all through the Scriptures, would include warnings against homosexual practices as well. Furthermore, the creation account describes heterosexual man and heterosexual woman. Any variation from this is going against one's Creator and his created order.

What, then, about those who say they have had same-sex attraction as long as they can remember? The ultimate causes of human behavior are often mysterious and complex, and certainly in a fallen world such genetic predispositions may exist, as they apparently do with alcoholism or depression. In such cases, believers are expected to strive toward wholeness. Alcoholics join recovery groups. Depressed people seek counseling and medication. This does not mean these problems resolve easily and painlessly without outside help. But we do no favor for the alcoholic or the depressed person if we tell them they really have no problem.

Jesus condemned self-righteous Pharisees who looked down on everyone but themselves. We rightly reject homophobia and pulpit pronouncements that mock and demonize homosexuals. Jesus pictured himself as the compassionate physician who healed diseases. But this means people actually had diseases and actually needed healing. They were not what God intended them to be. This is the case with the homosexual as well, according to the Bible.