



Homosexuality and the Modern Church

One of the most difficult and contentious conflicts in Christianity has been, and continues to be, the homosexual and the Christian Church. All one has to do is turn on the television and listen to any of the televangelists, or the local Sunday pulpit, and one can find a constant, impassioned theme on the evil and sinfulness of the gay and lesbian population. These messengers of God's love cheerfully put the homosexual in the same category as murderers, adulterers, and child molesters. Why? What motivates not only right-wing fundamentalists, but also some mainline churches such as Roman Catholicism? How do they justify this self-righteous homophobia? Usually by quoting "the Bible". They use Scripture, both old and new, as the authority cited as to justify persecution, discrimination, and murder of homosexuals; the same Scriptures that were used to justify slavery and treating women as second-class citizens. Let's examine the Scripture passages most often used.

Using the "New American Bible," the main "Catholic Bible," I take Genesis, Chapter 19, the main scriptural quote used by those who condemn homosexuality, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this version the translators interpret the key phrase as "intimacies," as in, "Bring them out to us that we may have intimacies with them." The term in the original Hebrew is Yadha, or Yada, or "to know." This term can be found in ancient Hebrew Scripture 943 times and is used to signify sexual activity only from ten to twelve times. Many scholars question the exact meaning of Yada in this context. Did they wish to assault them? Rob them? Or did they

want to rape them? In addition, the fact that Lot would offer his two daughters to appease the mob tells us that these were not gay men, but just men who used rape for domination, much as in a prison. Throughout Western civilization, historical evidence indicates that rape was used to emasculate the man, putting the victim in the same category as women, the ultimate shame for a man. Frequently, soldiers not only raped the women on the losing side of a battle, but the soldiers as well were subject to rape, completing their total defeat.

One must also keep in mind the laws of hospitality to strangers, which were very important in those nomadic days. The very lives of people were at stake, for if travelers did not receive shelter, food, and water they would perish. The sacred Scriptures show that the sin that destroyed Sodom was not homosexuality, but the way in which they treated strangers. However, since hospitality dictates that you offer welcome to all strangers that you encounter, the Church finds itself in an awkward position. Since many churches are far too busy condemning gay people, and driving them from the Lord's house, they can hardly admit that inhospitality, abuse, and offense to the visitor were the grievous sins of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In reading Judges 19:15-29, one can find an extremely close parallel to the story of Sodom. Once again, the people of the town demonstrate a lack of hospitality, and gang rape occurs. This time, a woman is raped and abused all night when the intended male victim was not brought out and handed over to the mob. When is the last time a story appeared in the media or in history regarding a group of homosexual men raping a woman all night?

If one looks to the New Testament, Matthew 11:23-24, it is obvious to the most ardent homophobe that the sin of Sodom was failure to give protection, comfort, and shelter, as in Luke 10:5-12.

In Mark 7:10-11, again Jesus talks about hospitality, much as in Luke and Matthew. Further adding to the difficulty of this passage are the fears, prejudices, and contemporary moral codes of those who translated the Bible down through the ages. Scholars also note that it was not until the twelfth century that the story of Sodom was interpreted to mean homosexuality. Finally, scholars tell us that the Hebrew word used to connote homosexual or bestial sex, is Shakhav. This term does not appear in the passage. In Leviticus 18:22, we find "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; such a thing is an abomination." In Hebrew the word for abomination is,

To'evah, which is usually reserved for condemnation of idolatry, not sexual acts. Scholars believe that the passage using this term, To'evah, was referring to temple prostitution, which was common, not gay relationships as we know them today.

Many people in those days took great pains to condemn and attempt to eliminate temple prostitutes, who were both male and female. Another example would be the Greek word "Arsenokoitai." In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1952 RSV translation, Arsenokoitai means homosexuals. The 1977 version of the Bible translates this word as meaning sexual perverts. The 1989 version translates the word as sodomites. A review of other translations reveals the word to have meant homosexuals, sodomites, child molesters, perverts, or "people of infamous habits." Finally, the New American Bible translates Arsenokoitai as "practicing homosexuals." A first-century text now reflects twentieth-century Roman teaching; i.e., to be a homosexual is not a sin, but to be a "practicing homosexual" is a sin! Another of the important Greek words is "Malakoi," which has been translated down through the ages as meaning catamites, the effeminate, boy prostitutes, and sissies. However, until the twentieth century, in Roman Catholicism the word meant "masturbators." As prejudices have changed, so has the biblical translation.

Many of the passages, and all of the Levitical code, come from the Jewish Holiness Code, which forbade many things and has been abandoned by the twentieth-century Church with one exception: homosexuality. When is the last time you knew someone who was concerned about what their clothes were made of so as to not break the laws of Moses?

For New Testament authority, St. Paul is cited. Paul is the premier Founding Father of the Christian Church, and as such, his words hold great weight, but as Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong says, "they are Paul's words, not God's." Note, that it is St. Paul quoted and not any words of Jesus himself!

In Romans 1:26-27, God is seen to have given men and women "up" to disgraceful passions. This act was in reprisal for idolatry and failure to recognize God as He who is. So, we have God as the causal connection to acts, which they then condemned! This lacks any sense. Why would God, as a punishment for ignoring his goodness, cause men and women to engage in acts that were not of their nature?

All of the passages that refer to homosexuality must be taken in the historical frame and context in which they were written.

Nowhere does Jesus himself say anything about gay people or gay sex. His only comments on sexual morals are regarding the prostitute and the adulterer. If homosexuality were such a sin, does it not make sense that Jesus would have talked about it at least once? Nevertheless, Jesus makes no reference at all to homosexuality. Jesus addressed all of the sins that mankind falls into; perhaps he didn't address the "sin" of homosexuality because love is not a sin. For it is far more than who gay people have sex with, it is who gay people fall in love with, who they can *only* fall in love with that makes the difference.

One reason that the twelve tribes of Israel might have had for condemning homosexual activity was sexual activity that failed to produce more Israelites. In a time when war was always a possibility (and that really has not changed much), a constant supply of new warriors were needed and homosexuality failed to achieve this goal. Truly then, the Bible is subject to interpretation by those who study it. I believe the Bible to be the word of God in its very essence. Nevertheless, the imperfect hands and minds of men have filtered this essence down through the ages. One must read the Bible in the "historical critical" method to gain a proper understanding of its contents. I also believe that the sacred Scriptures are a living, breathing entity, and one must "pray" the Gospel to find the meaning and message hidden deeply within the sacred words. As to the nature of the gay man and woman, it is not unreasonable to state that homosexuals are created in the image of God. For in Genesis 1:26-27, we find God saying, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." For, if gay people are born this way, then they are created in the image of God. For God is the quintessential good, totally without evil, and therefore incapable of creating an evil. It would be against the total good to create that which was in direct conflict with that good. God's likeness includes black, white, and every hue of color in between, male and female. Then why not gay and straight? The face of God is truly the face of humanity, and that includes the gay face of God. Would we limit God in His capacity to create His children, restricted to what man believes only to be correct?

We believe homosexuality is now, and always has been, a naturally occurring phenomenon. St. Thomas Aquinas writes about free will in his *Summa Theologica*. He states,

“For the sheep seeing the wolf, judges it a thing to be shunned, from a natural and not a free judgment, because it judges, not from reason, but from natural instinct.” So also do I believe that gay people are attracted to one another by natural instinct. The capacity to love and worship and build lives together is not limited to just heterosexuals.

We find it a moral imperative that gay and lesbian people be ministered to. For how can it be righteous to withhold the love and acceptance of the Lord from those who may be different from the majority? Certainly, the ancient Jews saw Jesus as a left-wing-leaning radical and as different. Did not Jesus walk among those who were the despised of his time, spreading the good news, and accepting them in love? Did not this “man” talk of loving your enemy, of turning the other cheek, all of which was not part of the psyche of the time?

If there is no foundation for excluding gay people from the church, how can it be tolerated? How much pain and sorrow must be caused in the name of the “perfect love” before we shout “Enough!” Why must the self-righteous among us rant and rave about that which they know nothing, all in the name of the Prince of Peace?