

The Bible and Homosexuality: A Christian View

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Many of us were raised with the understanding that the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible itself talks about God's revelation through the inspired experiences and words of its characters and writers. Christians see Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of scripture, "the Word made flesh." So Christians ultimately affirm that Jesus Christ is the Word of God.

This understanding frees us to ask in a given situation, "What would Jesus do?" If Jesus reveals God's identity, then to ask what Jesus would do is to ask what God would do. Would Jesus create homosexual people and then condemn them? Would Jesus require celibacy of all homosexual people and not of all heterosexual people? Would Jesus encourage Christians to exclude or attack the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people? Would Jesus deny ongoing loving relationships between people of the same-gender, when not denying such relationships to people of the opposite gender?

We know Jesus better than that. Jesus was and is always fair-minded and even-handed. He would never impose a different set of standards on one particular group. In addition, Jesus repeatedly chose to be with the religious outcasts of his time. The only people he heartily criticized were the self-righteous religious leaders who excluded lepers, women, eunuchs, people with disabilities, and others from God's house.

Taking the clue from Jesus' own inclusive ministry, the early Jewish church opened its doors to Gentiles, an enormous shift in the religious thinking of the time. Gentiles were thought of as unclean, disgusting, perverse idolaters practicing immoral lifestyles, the way some people today think of LGBT people.

But the Holy Spirit, which Jesus promised his disciples, led the early church to welcome Gentiles without requiring them to become Jewish first, just as many churches today are welcoming of lesbian and gay people without requiring them to become straight first, as if that were even possible.

The apostle Paul refers to this negative attitude toward Gentiles in the first chapter of Romans. He wants to get the self-righteous members of the church at Rome worked into a frothing-at-the-mouth frenzy over those idolatrous Gentiles who practice all sorts of nasty things, from gossip to “unnatural” lust. But Paul’s purpose is revealed in the second chapter, when he turns the tables on the self-righteous Christians at Rome and questions how they can judge others when they themselves are doing many of the things they accuse the Gentiles of doing.

If this sounds familiar, like heterosexual Christians who have a 50% divorce rate attacking gay people who wish to marry, that’s because the nature of Holy Scripture is that it is able to speak to us in modern times, across cultural differences.

Paul’s argument in Romans is that Christians are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, not by following the Law of Moses, not by conforming to some external standard.

The Law of Moses included the Holiness Code of Leviticus, where there are two verses that condemn men literally “acting like a woman” with other men. The Holiness Code, much like our own culture, required men to act like men and women to act like women. Mixing up gender expectations was forbidden, thought of as ritual error rather than a moral mistake. Not conforming to gender expectations also prompts today’s religious and social discomfort around transgender or intersex people, or men who are gentle rather than tough, or women who are strong rather than weak.

But, “In Christ there is no longer male and female.” These words of Paul suggest that gender differences are irrelevant for the Christian.

Underlying the Holiness Code of Leviticus, though, is a spiritual truth. The Holiness Code encouraged individual integrity and social harmony. To apply this spiritual truth to the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, as well as straight people is to challenge all of us to affirm and practice spiritual-sexual integrity and spiritual-gender integrity. It also challenges churches and governments to welcome and integrate diversity and foster justice and equal rights.

A case in point is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. All the men of Sodom gathered to abuse the strangers visiting their city through a common practice of ancient days: gang rape. Like such rape in prisons, this act has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with humiliation.

Jesus himself viewed the sin of Sodom as inhospitality, declaring that it would be better in the Day of Judgment for Sodom than for those towns that prove inhospitable to his disciples.

The irony is that churches that use this story to exclude and abuse lesbian and gay people are actually practicing the sin of Sodom: inhospitality.

All are welcome in the new reign of God, Jesus said. Repentance is expected, but not repentance of how God made us. However, some Christians look to a list of those who will not enter the kingdom of heaven in 1 Corinthians and claim gay people are on it.

But on that list, two are Greek words are sometimes translated as one, a sure sign that their meaning is uncertain. “Malakoi” literally means “softness” and implies moral looseness. “Arsenkoitai” literally means “males who go to bed” and is a word universally used at the time in heterosexual contexts, and probably refers to sexual exploitation. Neither of these words were used to imply homosexuality.

What’s important for Christians to know is that Jesus never condemned homosexuality. And defended eunuchs who could not procreate, and eunuchs had the same status as homosexuals in religious law. Jesus implied that eunuchs shall be welcomed in the kingdom of heaven, just as God said through the prophet Isaiah that eunuchs shall be welcomed in God’s “house of prayer for all peoples.”

What’s also important is that no opposite gender pair received so much attention on the pages of the Bible as Ruth and Naomi and David and Jonathan. Though same-gender sexuality may not be modeled in scripture, same-gender love is honored and respected.

For Christians, Jesus is not dead, a mere artifact of history. Jesus continues to inspire us to do new things not even thought possible in his time. Many Christians across denominations and traditions have realized that one of those new things we learn through his Spirit is that we are called to welcome lesbians, gay men, and transgender and bisexual people.

For further reading, see What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality by Daniel Helminiak and Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality by Jack Rogers.