

## Is the Bible Ambiguous about Homosexuality?

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### Introduction

On the basis of Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10,<sup>1</sup> P. Michael Ukleja has rightly said, "Only towering cynicism can pretend that there is any doubt about what the Scriptures say about homosexuality. The Bible has not even the slightest hint of ambiguity about what is permitted or forbidden in this aspect of sexual conduct."<sup>2</sup>

As we survey our culture we cannot but notice this tower of cynicism, which of late has grown quite large. In fact, it would probably rival that of Babel. The worst part however, is not the size but that its builders are professing Christians.

Glimpses of this tower can even be seen in the so-called Bible belt. In southeastern Kentucky an article entitled "Homosexuals: Are we still stoning?" by Dr. John Burkhart, pastor of St. John's Episcopal Church in Corbin, KY appeared in *The Sentinel-Echo* newspaper (8-19-03). In this article the author condones homosexual orientation and (monogamous) practice on the basis of the clear results of medical/psychological studies and the unclear teaching of the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Lev. 18:22: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It *is* an abomination." Lev. 20:13: "If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood *shall be* upon them." Rom. 1:26-27: "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due." 1 Cor. 6:9-11: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." 1 Tim. 1:9-10: "knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for *the* lawless and insubordinate, for *the* ungodly and for sinners, for *the* unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine..."

<sup>2</sup> "Homosexuality and the Old Testament," *BSAC* 140 (July 1983): 259.

With the purpose of collapsing this tower, this article will briefly examine two popular theological arguments used to call into question the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality. It will also deal with the claim of some medical/psychological studies that homosexuality is natural. But before we can get to the arguments we need to remove some debris.

## Debris Clearing

One problem in discussing this issue is that those who disagree with the homosexual agenda are often labeled as being judgmental. Dr. Burkhart in the aforementioned article employed the phrase "stone-throwing, judgmental persecutors of homosexuals." Correlative to this is the assertion that either you love homosexuals or you condemn them. There is no middle ground. To denounce the homosexual lifestyle is to be hateful and unloving.

These things often hinder people from giving the truth a fair hearing. After all, who wants to listen to a judgmental, hateful and unloving opinion and/or person? Consequently, we need to disarm people of these prejudices. We need to clear away some debris to help them see the truth.

The act of judging is something we cannot avoid.<sup>3</sup> We will tip our hats in deference to some things while censuring others. Forming opinions, both positive and negative, is something we all do. So, it is not a matter of whether or not we judge, but rather how we judge. Only the naïve or the hypocritical will say that it is wrong to judge.

More importantly, the Bible commands us to judge both positively and negatively. The Apostle John wrote, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1; see also 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Cor. 14:29; Matt. 7:15ff.). Once we have judged, we are to "hold fast what is good" and reject what is sinful (1 Thess. 5:21; Gal. 1:9). The Ephesian Church tested those who called themselves apostles, found them to be liars and thoroughly rejected them. For this reason, Jesus highly commended them (Rev. 2:2). Therefore, to judge or condemn something is not *per se* a mark or indication of "being judgmental."

It is also crucial to realize that love and criticism are not mutually exclusive. The options are not acceptance and love on the one hand, and hate and condemnation on the other. One can love a homosexual even though he objects to his lifestyle, just as one can love a thief while condemning his stealing. What is more, refusal to condone sin and willingness to confront it is, according to the Scriptures, an act of love (see Prov. 25:5-6).

At this point we see that loving homosexuals requires that we make a judgment. Fundamentally, the issue is not *whether* we should love homosexuals. Of course we are

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<sup>3</sup> See my article, "Judging According to the Bible," *JBC* 21 (2002): 62-69.

to love homosexuals! The issue is *how* we are to love them. And this question cannot be answered apart from a judgment of homosexuality. For, if it is true that homosexuality is a sin and that no “homosexual offenders ... will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:10, NIV), then it would be most unloving to the homosexual to encourage him in his sin either by vocal approbation or by remaining silent.

## Theological Arguments

In this section I want to look at two arguments that are offered for doubting the overwhelmingly clear condemnation of homosexuality in Scripture.

### *“The Bible Does Not Condemn Homosexuality”*

The first argument is that the word “homosexual,” which is used in some Bible translations, is a mistranslation. In fact, the claim is made that there is no biblical word for “homosexual.” The Bible only addresses sinful expressions of homosexuality, but not homosexuality *per se*. Accordingly, the Old Testament prohibition “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable” (Lev. 18:22; cf. 20:13) refers to religious or cultic homosexuality (i.e. a form of idolatry and prostitution) and not to non-cultic homosexuality. From the perspective, the New Testament Greek word *arsenokoites*<sup>4</sup> is narrowly defined as male prostitutes and/or pederasty.

But Leviticus 18:22 condemns homosexuality in general. There is no mention of religious homosexuality/prostitutes in this verse or its surrounding context (although there is in Deut. 23:17-18). God does not want his people to imitate the abominable practices of the Canaanites (Lev. 18:3), for which they were being punished (Lev. 18:24-25). The Canaanites practiced general (in the bedroom) and specific (in the temple) homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 condemns the former, and Deuteronomy 23:17-18 the latter.

But even, as one theologian has noted, “if it could be shown that there is some cultic association with the homosexuality prohibited in Leviticus 18:22, there is still no reason to think that the law is exhaustively cultic in its reference; after all, God would abhor homosexuality all the more, it seems, for its incidental idolatrous connections. The circumstance would in this sense aggravate the offense of homosexuality, not reformulate the basic meaning of the prohibition.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Arsenokoites* appears in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10. It is variously translated as “homosexuals” (NASB); “homosexual offenders” (NIV); “men who practice homosexuality” (ESV); “abusers of themselves with men” (ASV); and “sodomites” (NKJV, Moffatt).

<sup>5</sup> Bahnsen, Greg. *Homosexuality: A Biblical View* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), 45.

The absurdity of this pro-homosexual interpretation is demonstrated by applying the same reasoning to other sexual prohibitions listed in Leviticus 18. For example, the very next verse condemns bestiality. Is non-religious bestiality morally acceptable? What about incest, which is denounced in verses 6-17? Are brothers free to sleep with their sisters as long as it is non-religious, consensual, monogamous, and occurs within a “loving” relationship?

As has been mentioned, the New Testament Greek word *arsenokoites*, used in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, is similarly narrowed to refer to male prostitutes and/or pederasty. This word is a combination of “male” (*arsen*) and “bed” (*koite*), so that its etymology means “to go to bed with a male.” It first appears in the writings of the Apostle Paul; it does not appear to have had an established use prior to this. This implies that its meaning is derived directly from its etymology. It is likely that Paul coined this term from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (both Greek terms are used in both verses).

Recent research has confirmed that *arsenokoites* is indeed a broad term properly translated as “homosexual.”<sup>6</sup> As Professor James B. De Young says, “It cannot be limited to pederasty or ‘active male prostitutes’; nor can it be limited to acts. It must also include same-sex orientation or condition.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, contrary to some biblical scholars, there is a term for “homosexuality” in the Bible and it, along with fornication and incest, is condemned as sin.

### *“Homosexuality Is Not Unnatural”*

A second argument for doubting the Bible’s denunciation of homosexuality boldly affirms that Romans 1:26-27 does not condemn homosexuality as being unnatural, that is, it does not teach that homosexuality is contrary to God’s created order. Instead, the phrase “against nature” in verse 26 is taken to refer to acting contrary to one’s orientation. It is argued that the word “nature” in this context means “what is natural to me.” Therefore, Paul is saying that heterosexuals must not act like homosexuals and vice versa, as that would be personally unnatural for them.

Needless to say, this interpretation is far-fetched. The word “nature” never means, “what is natural to me” in either Greek literature or the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, verse 27 says that the male leaves or abandons the “natural use of the female.” This abandonment is not subjective or personal (one’s personal sexual orientation); it is objective and generic (sexual function of the female).

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Wright, D.F. “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ARSENOKOITAI (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10),” *VC* 38 (1984): 125-53.

<sup>7</sup> James B. De Young, “The Source and NT Meaning of Arsenokoitai, with Implications for Christian Ethics and Ministry,” *MSJ* 3 (1992): 207.

<sup>8</sup> James B. De Young, “The Meaning of ‘Nature’ In Romans 1 And Its Implications For Biblical Proscriptions Of Homosexual Behavior,” *JETS* 31 (1988): 438.

One reason God created man in two genders (male and female) was for the purpose of sexual satisfaction. The female was made for the male and the male for the female. Hence, Paul says that the husband's body belongs to the wife and the wife's body belongs to the husband (1 Cor. 7). Each is to find sexual fulfillment in the other. Consequently, when a male seeks sexual pleasure in another male, Paul says he leaves the created or "natural" use of the female.

In short, according to Romans 1:26-27, homosexuality is not "normal" or "natural." Neither is it innocent or morally acceptable. It is unnatural and sinful.

### **Scientific/Medical Claims**

A number of people today would have us believe that medical and psychological studies have proven conclusively that homosexuality is natural, making it impossible for homosexuals to change their ways. They are simply born, constituted or orientated this way. And if they are made this way, then surely their Creator cannot condemn them for it.

In response, let me say first of all that nothing of the sort has been proven. The various studies are at best inconclusive. For example, concerning biological causes, in an article from *Scientific American*, W. Byne writes,

A biological or physiological origin for homosexuality is not proven. What biological evidence exists thus far of innate biological traits underlying homosexuality is flawed. Genetic studies suffer from the inevitable confounding of nature and nurture that plagues attempts to study heritability of psychological traits. Investigations of the brain rely on doubtful hypotheses about differences between the brains of men and women. Biological mechanisms that have been proposed to explain the existence of gay men often cannot be generalized to explain the existence of lesbians (whom studies have largely neglected). And the continuously graded nature of most biological variables is at odds with the paucity of adult bisexuals suggested by most surveys.<sup>9</sup>

Second, we need to distinguish between cause and influence. Various factors (environmental, biological, and psychological) may *influence* people to become homosexual, but they do not *cause* them to become so. For example, poverty may influence stealing, and migraines may predispose one to irritability, but these do not force one to steal or be angry.

Third, we need to distinguish between *necessary* and *sufficient* cause. It is possible that some biological, environmental and/or psychological factors may need to

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<sup>9</sup> "The Biological Evidence Challenged," *Scientific American* (May 1994): 50-55. Cited by James R. Beck, "Evangelicals, Homosexuality, And Social Science," *JETS* 40 (1997): 91.

be present for one to lead a homosexual lifestyle, making these *necessary* causes. However, their presence alone does not result in homosexuality, meaning that they are not *sufficient* causes. If there is one thing that these scientific studies have proven, it is that none of these various factors are sufficient causes. A person still must make a choice.

Fourth, it is important to be aware of the biblical relationship between the body and soul. The two are so closely related and interconnected that one affects the other. The thoughts and intents of our hearts are expressed through our bodies, and what happens to our bodies can affect how we think and feel.<sup>10</sup> As a result, a habitually angry person will display different brain activity than a peaceful person, and one who constantly worries will develop gastro-intestinal disorders. Therefore, we should not be surprised if there are physiological differences in homosexuals.

Fifth, the Bible (1 Cor. 6:11) teaches us that homosexuals can change, and counseling shows us that some homosexuals do change. This indicates that homosexuality is neither necessary nor inalterable, regardless of any association it may have to one's constitution.

Finally, the Bible tells us that the cause of all sin is the heart. "Out of [the heart] are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matt. 15:19). Therefore, the reason men sin, whether it is homosexuality or adultery, is that they want to sin. The problem is our sinful desire, not our genes. As James 1:13-15 says,

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

## Conclusion

The looming tower of cynicism that presents the Bible as ambiguous on homosexuality is easily toppled. For the building blocks are not strong enough to sustain such an ambitious and outrageous structure. This, however, is good news for the homosexual. You are not bound like a slave to your homosexual lifestyle, which you know to be wrong and judged by God (Rom. 1:32). Christ has come to set the sinner free. He is the friend and savior of sinners. He is able to wipe your guilt away and to change you from within so that you might not perish but receive eternal life. Turn to him right now and you will find love, forgiveness, hope, peace, grace and life forevermore. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> See Edward T. Welch, *Blame It On the Brain* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), 169.