

What Does the Bible Say about Homosexuality?

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Do the Hebrew and Christian scriptures tell us homosexuality is immoral or unnatural?

It all depends on how you understand the Bible. It depends on whether your faith is a living, dynamic one, or whether it's just a lot of rules and formulas. There have always been those who, despite their sincerity, misunderstand faith as a set of legalistic moralisms. Remember, such folks demanded the death of Jesus on the grounds that he took the legalisms of their common religious tradition too lightly.

In recent times there have appeared those who want to read the Bible literally and legalistically, like a technical manual. Read literally, certain sections of the Bible support slavery, the property status of women, racial segregation, and genocide on religious grounds. And sure enough, several American church denominations were split not long ago when Christians used the Bible to support slavery and racial segregation. Some Christians have earned a reputation for being on the least human side of every issue!

Jesus was quite different. To him, the living God was always greater than even the words of the Bible, which his opponents used to attack him.

The fact is, those who now go around condemning gay people base their arguments on about six "proof texts" of Scripture, while missing the main point of Scripture as a whole. And they've even misunderstood their "proof texts!"

The Bible and Gay People

It is unfortunate that a society that considers itself tolerant of all religious beliefs should attempt to base its civil legislation on the Bible or on any other arbitrarily selected holy book of scriptures. But because this is so, it's important to realize exactly what the Bible does and does not say about sexual and emotional relations between individuals of the same sex.

It is sometimes said that the Bible will justify nearly anything. When isolated verses are pulled out of context, anything can happen. But when considered in the literary and historical contexts, these passages do not mean what many people think they mean. Have a look.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

No section of the Bible has made more trouble for gay people than these frequently mentioned verses in Leviticus. They were probably composed during a late period of Israel's

history while under Persian domination. These texts call for the death penalty for sexual acts between men. But then, the same book of Leviticus prohibits eating rabbit, oysters, clams, shrimp, and pork (Leviticus 21). And much, much more. Why should two verses in Leviticus be considered still valid when so much else in the same book is not?

Genesis 19:4–11 and Judges 19:22

The Sodom story (Genesis 19:4–11) is one of a mob's violation of the ancient value of hospitality toward two angelic visitors to their city, in the form of an attempted homosexual rape. The Gibeah story (Judges 19:22) is strikingly similar, but the rape is heterosexual. In Ezekiel 16:49, Isaiah 1:9–17 and 3:9–15, and Jeremiah 23:14, the sins of Sodom are described as arrogance, adultery, lies, insincere religious practices, political corruption, oppression of the poor, and neglect of the fatherless and widows. Homosexuality is not mentioned. When Jesus refers in Luke 10:10–13 to Sodom's sin, he's speaking about inhospitality. So much inhospitality has been practiced against homosexuals!

Romans 1:26–32

Saint Paul believed homosexual acts to be unnatural. In fact, he viewed all sexuality with fear and disapproval, urging those who could to abstain. But today's psychological, sociological, and scientific knowledge indicates that it is unnatural for a gay man or lesbian to defy his/her own "nature" and personality structure by attempting heterosexual relationships and sexual activity. And the language about "giving up" heterosexual relations does not describe a homosexual person, who did not deliberately choose to be homosexual just to defy God!

One could also argue that much of Paul's writing on social issues has little bearing on modern society. No one today would argue for the restoration of slavery in the United States based on Paul, although he very clearly condones slavery. Paul also commands women to be silent and not to teach men.

I Corinthians 6:9–10 and I Timothy 1:5–10

Problems of mistranslation arise in these epistles, one by Saint Paul and the other by an unknown author. The word *homosexuals* is not justified by the Greek text, which reads *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. Scholars do not know what these words mean (they have something to do with prostitution), so some translations have arbitrarily inserted the word *homosexual*. Earlier editions of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible read *homosexual* here, but the later (1977 and on) editions of the same fine translation have dropped the word.

Of course, many zealously self-righteous folks would rather go on reading certain select passages of Scripture literally and even inaccurately to use as ammunition against people they hate or fear. Such literalism is always selective, though! No one—repeat, *no one*—should actually take the *whole* Bible literally. If that were the case, they would not allow women to speak in church or ever teach men, demanding instead that women wear veils (1 Corinthians 14:34–35, 11:1–16); we would demand the death penalty for lending money with interest (Ezekiel 18:5–18, Deuteronomy 23:19–20). Should bankers be ordained? Should they be protected by civil rights statutes? Should they *live*?

Those who use the Bible like ammunition, singling out homosexual people for special

abuse, miss the main point of the Bible as a whole. What follows are some of the themes they miss.

The Gospels

Jesus, who had a great deal to say about the impossibility of the rich attaining salvation, had nothing to say about homosexuality.

Jesus is hardly a “role model” for heterosexual family life. Jesus’ lifestyle represented a dramatic break with the way almost all people, especially religious people, were expected to live. Instead of marrying, he associated intimately with twelve men. One loved him so much he was called “The Beloved Disciple,” or “The disciple whom Jesus loved.” One of the last times Jesus was seen alive by the twelve, this disciple was lying with his head on Jesus. He wrote a deep, emotional book about Jesus, called the Book of John. Jesus seems to define an alternative style of family in Mark 3:19–35.

The Bible is essentially a history of love—divine love, reaching out to ever broadening circles of humanity as one category of prejudice and exclusion after another is overcome by love, the cohesive force that draws all God’s creation together into one whole. Jesus preached and practiced an inclusive, universal Gospel that set aside cheap moralisms in favor of love.

About Jonathan and David

Here’s Scripture the opponents of homosexual people won’t quote. It’s the moving story of love between Jonathan and David (I Samuel 16–20, 1:19–27). Jonathan’s father, King Saul, is clearly disturbed by the relationship: “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman, do I not know that you have chosen David the son of Jesse to your own shame?” But Israel has celebrated David as its greatest hero. In this passage, we read, “Your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” (Incidentally, the story of Ruth and Naomi, in the book of Ruth, portrays a woman’s love passing—for a woman—the love of men.) For many of these reasons, many progressive theologians, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, now believe the real message of the Bible is not in conflict with gay and lesbian orientation.