

The Issue Behind the Issue

Biblical Interpretation & the Issue of Human Sexuality

Introductory Statements from the Book of Discipline

United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine. Through Scripture the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace. We are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God in our midst whom we trust in life and death. The biblical authors, illumined by the Holy Spirit, bear witness that in Christ the world is reconciled to God. The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history.

As we open our minds and hearts to the Word of God through the words of human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our understanding is deepened, and the possibilities for transforming the world become apparent to us.

The Bible is sacred canon for Christian people, formally acknowledged as such by historic ecumenical councils of the church. Our doctrinal standards identify as canonical thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

Our standards affirm the Bible as the source of all that is "necessary" and "sufficient" unto salvation (Articles of Religion) and "is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice" (Confession of Faith).

We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community.

We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole.

We are aided by scholarly inquiry and personal insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we work with each text, we take into account what we have been able to learn about the original context and intention of that text. In this understanding we draw upon the careful historical, literary, and textual studies of recent years, which have enriched our understanding of the Bible.

Through this faithful reading of Scripture, we may come to know the truth of the biblical message in its bearing on our own lives and the life of the world. Thus, the Bible serves both as a source of our faith and as the basic criterion by which the truth and fidelity of any interpretation of faith is measured.

While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church. They quicken our faith, open our eyes to the wonder of God's love, and clarify our understanding.

The Wesleyan heritage, reflecting its origins in the catholic and reformed ethos of English Christianity, directs us to a self-conscious use of these three sources in interpreting Scripture and in formulating faith statements based on the biblical witness. These sources are, along with Scripture, indispensable to our theological task.

The close relationship of tradition, experience, and reason appears in the Bible itself. Scripture witnesses to a variety of diverse traditions, some of which reflect tensions in interpretation within the early Judeo-Christian heritage. However, these traditions are woven together in the Bible in a manner that expresses the fundamental unity of God's revelation as received and experienced by people in the diversity of their own lives.

The developing communities of faith judged them, therefore, to be an authoritative witness to that revelation. In recognizing the interrelationship and inseparability of the four basic resources for theological understanding, we are following a model that is present in the biblical text itself.

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- ❖ Though the Bible is the authoritative source of religious truth for United Methodists, fully understanding the biblical message requires an appreciation of context. Specific portions of Scripture should never be read in isolation, for United Methodists believe that biblical passages should be interpreted in light of their place in the Bible as a whole.

Specific Passages on Homosexuality

- ❖ For all the controversy surrounding the issue of homosexuality, the Bible does not place much direct focus on the subject. Only seven passages make specific reference to same-sex relations.
- ❖ Traditionalists believe that these passages provide a clear, consistent biblical condemnation and prohibition against homosexual behavior. Our current denominational stance is based upon this view.
- ❖ Progressives frequently call these passages "lobber verses," contending that they have been used to subjugate LGBTQ people at the expense of the broader, more inclusive message of Scripture.
- ❖ Interestingly, Jesus never mentions the subject of same-sex relationships, nor do the four Gospel accounts of his life and ministry.

1. **Genesis 19:4-11 (The Sin of Sodom)** – ⁴ *But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵ and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” ⁹ But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.*

2. **Jude 7 (The Sin of Sodom)** – ⁷ *Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.*

❖ While the Early Church presumed a strong theological connection between the above two passages and homosexuality, contemporary United Methodists on both the right and the left generally downplay the passages’ significance to this particular debate. When “Sodom’s Sin” is referenced elsewhere in the Bible, homosexuality is not the focus. Ezekiel 16:49 makes it clear that Sodom’s chief transgression was pride, greed and inattention to those in need: *“This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”*

3. **Leviticus 18:22 (The Holiness Code)** – ²² *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*

4. **Leviticus 20:13 (The Holiness Code)** – ¹³ *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.*

❖ For traditionalists, these are the most direct condemnations of same-sex behavior in the Old Testament that should serve as a guide to behavior in our time as well.

❖ Progressives believe that these two passages in Leviticus are culturally specific. There are many laws in Leviticus that Christians no longer follow because we assume that, rather than being mandates of God’s timeless will, they were legal or ceremonial practices narrowly intended for the people of ancient Israel.

5. **1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (Paul’s Lists of Sins)** – ⁹ *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And this is what some of you used to be. But*

you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

6. **1 Timothy 1:9-11 (Paul's Lists of Sins)** – ⁹*This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, ¹⁰fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.*

- ❖ These passages seem straightforward enough, but upon closer examination, understanding their relevance to the debate over homosexuality becomes more complex. When Paul lists homosexual acts in the passages above, he uses two Greek words – *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. These are very rare terms, and it is necessary to explore their meaning. Not surprisingly, traditionalists and progressives have divergent understandings of how to interpret these unfamiliar terms. Essentially, the progressive view is that these rare terms are both so vague that it is not at all certain that they refer to homosexual behavior. Traditionalists disagree.

7. **Romans 1:24-27 (“Unnatural Relations” & Creation)** – ²⁴*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*

- ❖ This is the passage that many believe to be the most significant among the Bible's direct references to homosexuality. It really is the pivotal passage.
- ❖ For traditionalists, it is difficult to imagine how Paul could be any clearer. In his view, same-sex relations are a form of “trading God's truth for a lie and succumbing to the passions of creation rather than the will of the creator.” (verse 25)
- ❖ Progressives question what was meant by “unnatural sexual relations” in Paul's time. When ancient Jews spoke of intimate relations between members of the same sex, such relations during that era were commonly exploitative. People in Paul's historical and cultural context had no concept of loving, long-term, committed intimate relationships between two people of the same sex. The type of devoted relationships that LGBTQ Christians and their allies are endorsing were simply unknown. As a modern consensus grows in support of the idea that a segment of humanity possesses an inherent homosexual orientation, progressives argue that it is crucial for Christians to alter their understanding of Paul's usage of the word “natural.”