

# Human Sexuality in Biblical perspectives

**For people within the Uniting Church, the Basis of Union provides a foundation for careful and prayerful thinking about scripture. The Basis affirms that the witness of scripture is to be understood through the work undertaken by scholarly interpreters, by insights that have arisen in scientific and medical investigation, by understandings that have developed in society, as we better understand how human beings operate and how they function. All of these are important matters to consider when we think about human sexuality.**

A number of passages are regularly cited in relation to matters of human sexuality. We need to think about those sections of scripture in the light of this way of approaching the biblical texts. Before turning to specific texts, we offer a summary of the key points of critical scholarship and the understanding of what is, and what is not, explicitly referred to in these passages.

## Language

The first thing to note is that the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek languages, so there are questions about how particular words should be translated, whether there are exact equivalences in English, and so on. Many translations use the word "homosexual" where the original language actually requires more nuance in translation.

## Culture

A second factor is that we need to reflect on the cultural customs of the societies within which the Bible came to be written. It is important to consider how these cultural customs have shaped the way in which the words were written.

"Homosexuality" is a modern concept, which was not known to the writers of the biblical texts in the way that we understand it. Scripture does not include anything relating to the loving, committed, lifelong relationship of two people of the same gender.

So, let us consider the key biblical passages which are often raised in discussion of human sexuality.

## Leviticus 18

The oft-quoted verse about same-gender sex (Leviticus 18:22) is not about same gender relationships, but about cultural shaming practices, using power to create inequality in relationship. That verse provides a critique of the practice in which a stronger male seeks to subordinate and demean a weaker male, through sexual activity. That activity is what is declared to be an "abomination".

This passage occurs in a section of Leviticus called "The Holiness Code" which has as its main purpose to set out laws to keep Israel different from the surrounding cultures. The rules of Leviticus were meant to set the Israelites apart from the Canaanites and Egyptians, who at that time participated in fertility rites in their temples that involved different forms of sex, including homosexual sex.

Male-to-male sex was seen to mix the roles of man and woman and such "mixing of kinds" during ancient times was defined as an "abomination," in the same way that mixing different kinds of seeds in a field was an abomination. It is interesting to note that this passage does not actually address the matter of female-to-female sex.



## Sodom and Gomorrah

The same applies to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, told in Genesis 19. This story is an example of what happens when God's people do not live up to God's expectations. It is teaching a lesson about the importance of hospitality to the stranger. The cruel men of the town were planning to rape the visitors and were definitely not homosexuals. Indeed, the prophet Ezekiel, inspired by the spirit (Ezekiel 16:49-50) declares that this is not about sexual sin, but about the sin of not providing hospitality.

## Judges 19

Another story, of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), makes it clear that hostile men did use this breach of hospitality protocols as a weapon against other men, seeking to shame the strangers in this way. This, again, is not about a same-gender relationship, where equality and mutuality are paramount. It is yet another example for the ancient Jewish culture of how not to act by showing the extreme inhospitable behavior of the town. Some mistakenly interpret the townsmen's behavior to be somehow related to homosexuality, but this was an example of the brutality of one group of men toward visitors.

## Jesus

At this point, we should note that in all four Gospel accounts, Jesus does not discuss sexuality very often—in fact, not in much detail at all. This area rates as of only tiny significance for him, and pales in comparison to the greatest focus which Jesus had—on wealth and poverty, and the importance of serving those on the edge, those who are in need.

## The Letters of Paul

References to sexual sins in Paul's letters (Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6) sit alongside a range of other sins, which are equally condemned, and equally challenging to our discipleship. The sexual sins are often singled out for attention; but Paul deals with all of them equally. He related all of these sins to idolatry, which, for him, was the fundamental sin. A loving relationship between people of the same gender is not idolatrous, but rather it can strengthen sense of the value of human life, something which God desires for us.

## Romans 1:18-27

In this verse the behavior Paul was addressing is explicitly associated with idol worship (probably temple prostitution). He most likely has in mind heterosexual people who searched for pleasure and broke away from their natural sexual orientation or their natural ways of having sex (both male and female) and participated in promiscuous sex with

anyone available or used methods of sex that were not culturally accepted.

In the surrounding culture it was common for men of a higher status to take sexual advantage of male slaves or male prostitutes. Here Paul is instructing his readers to keep pure and honour God. Paul is talking about the use and misuse of power and authority and how that impacts one's relationship with God. Paul didn't have in mind specifically prohibiting loving, committed consensual relationships between two people of the same gender, because they were never considered in his cultural context.

## I Corinthians 6:9-10

Here Paul's list of sinners includes two unusual Greek terms, *malakoi* and *arsenokoites*. *Malakoi* means "soft" and is also interpreted as male prostitutes. *Arsenokoites* is difficult to translate, but it probably refers to a male using his superiority to take sexual advantage of another male. Paul is right to condemn these sexual activities, but neither of them have anything to do with a loving, committed, consensual relationship between two people of the same gender.

## I Timothy 1:8-11

This is also a list with similarities to I Corinthians. This time it is a list of sins (as opposed to sinners) and includes the words  *pornos*, *arsenokoites* and *andrapodistes*. Each of them requires careful translation.

*Pornos* most likely refers to a male having sex outside of marriage. *Arsenokoites* can probably be defined as male same-gender relationships that involved some level of exploitation, inequality or abuse. *Andrapodistes* can be translated as "slave traders".

Scholars believe that the three terms were used together in that slave dealers (*andrapodistes*) would be acting as pimps for captured boys ( *pornos*) who would be taken advantage of by powerful men (*arsenokoites*). These are sins that certainly need to be addressed, but this Bible passage does not relate to homosexuals in a committed relationship.

## Conclusion

When we explore the scriptures typically used to condemn homosexuals, it is evident that none of them have anything to do with loving, committed consensual relationships between people of the same gender. At no place does the Bible refer to such homosexual relationships, simply because such relationships were not recognized by Hebrew society when the Bible was written. Rather, these passages are directed towards ancient Jews or early Christians, to teach them to follow purity laws, to worship God and not idols, to be holy and honor God, and not to exploit vulnerable people sexually. These scriptures do



not pertain to loving, committed, consensual same-gender relationships in today's society.

When interpreting Scripture, we can use the teachings of Jesus to redirect us so that we can understand how to apply these scriptures to our lives today. We would do well to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus' redemptive life and ministry and accept those who are different from ourselves with grace and openness.

The Bible is actually silent when it comes to addressing the ethics of loving, committed, consensual unions involving two people of the same

gender. Some may be tempted to think that these seven passages might be construed as referring to homosexuality, but as we dig deeper we see that they were rightly condemning other things: gang-rape, temple prostitution, idolatry and pederasty (a sexual relationship between adult male and adolescent boy). These were the concerns that the Biblical writers were condemning, and rightly so. These practices and the motivations behind them are very different from two people of the same gender sharing their lives together in a covenant relationship.

## **Alongside these passages, there are many sections of scripture which provide a more positive outlook on human sexuality. Here are some key affirming and inclusive verses.**

### **Genesis 1:26: "Let us create humankind in our image."**

In the Bible's creation story, God makes clear that, out of all of creation, human beings are created in God's image. That God is referred to in the plural in this passage could even suggest the idea of God containing a diversity of identities within God's own mysterious and infinite self. The assurance that all human beings are created in God's image reminds us from the start, that everyone is a sacred creation, and that God's image is broader than our own experience and understanding. Someone may look — or love — differently than you do, and still, simply by being a human, reflect the image of God.

### **Acts 10:15: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."**

In Acts 10, Peter has a dream in which he is commanded by God to consume food that is deemed "unclean" according to Jewish law. When Peter protests, God reminds him that God's declaration of what is clean is above — and may even contradict — any command of the law. This dream serves as a crucial instructive for Peter later in the passage, when he encounters Gentiles, which Jewish law would normally reject. This passage reminds us that God's promise and beloved community are not defined by our own rules or boundaries, or even our own understanding of God's law.

### **Mark 2:22: "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, <sup>SEP</sup>the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; <sup>SEP</sup>but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."**

This passage recalls a time when Jesus is questioned as to why his disciples don't rigidly obey the laws of their faith tradition. Jesus' reply is very illuminating: "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made." Jesus reminds us

that religion, tradition and belief are evolving concepts, and may require us to re-evaluate and reconsider our traditions and push the boundaries.

### **Acts 8:26-40: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"**

This passage recounts Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch, and is probably the most-cited biblical story by those seeking to affirm queer identity within Christian faith. Eunuchs in biblical times were othered and ostracized because of their failure to adhere to sexual norms. Common cultural understandings of the time would have held that their status as eunuchs barred them from inclusion in God's community. And yet, this eunuch seeks to follow the path of Christ even as he continues to live out his sexual otherness. And he is welcomed and joyfully baptized into Christ's community. The eunuch's question to Philip — "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" — underscores that his sexual status is not a barrier to inclusion in the eyes of God.

### **Isaiah 56:3-5: "For thus says the Lord: to the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths...I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."**

This text from Isaiah establishes that God's love for those deemed "sexually other" — re-emphasized generations later in Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch — in fact predates Jesus' radical message of inclusion and love. God promises everlasting recognition and inclusion for all who honor God, regardless of whether they have previously been deemed outsiders.

### **Isaiah 43:1: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."**

This message from the prophet Isaiah emphasizes God's steadfast love and protection for God's people. This verse in particular reminds believers that we are



loved and claimed by a God who redeems us and will always be with us — not out of our own achievement or deserving but out of God's devotion. For many who are queer and/or transgender, this passage can serve as a reminder that we, too, are called by name and do not need to be afraid.

**Galatians 3:23-29: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."**

This well-known passage from Galatians is used in many contexts to sound the Christian call of unity in the face of division and difference. In fact, most of Galatians is an instruction to early Christians to embrace Gentile Christ-followers, even though they did not share in other early believers' Jewish history, tradition, or laws.

Paul makes clear in these verses and elsewhere that Christ's promise is abundant and available to all people, and that those divisions and prejudices that have historically kept groups of people apart or given some power to some over others have no place in Christ's community. The particular phrase "there is no longer male and female" offers a challenge to traditional binary understandings of gender roles.

**Matthew 22:37-40: "Love God...love your neighbour...on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."**

Matthew has Jesus address the great number of Jewish laws and prophetic teachings — including those that many consider to condemn homosexuality — by making clear that the overarching command of a faithful life is love: love of God, and love of neighbour. This command to love underpins any and all other commands. And so, pursuit of law-abiding faithfulness that does not first root itself in love fails to understand the true purpose of the law and the true call of faith.

**Psalm 139: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."**

This beautiful, famous psalm sings of God's intimate and intentional knowledge of each person. It suggests

that every crucial part of our identity was known to God, crafted by God before we were born — and that, as beings made in such love, we are created good. This psalm also suggests that there is nowhere we can go that will remove us from God's steadfast love and presence.

**Matthew 15:21-28: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs <sup>[[SEP]]</sup> that fall from their masters' tables."**

This story in Matthew's Gospel details Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman. Her nationality makes her an outsider, and on this basis even Jesus rejects her when she comes seeking his help for her daughter. But the Canaanite woman challenges Jesus on his refusal, and Jesus praises her faith and heals her daughter after all. This story demonstrates that God's love is so expansive, it can surprise and stretch even Jesus Christ himself. It encourages Christians to be mindful of our own prejudices and understand that God's love isn't as restrictive as our own.

**Romans 15:7: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."**

This is not just a nice-sounding phrase that churches like to put on their walls. Paul is telling believers to fully accept and include other Christians in community with themselves, including those who disagree strongly about what is and is not permitted.

**1 John 4:7-8: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."**

This passage from 1 John emphasizes the centrality of love. It suggests that love is always from God, and a reflection of God. Thus any genuine love, no matter what form it takes, comes from God and glorifies God. Anyone seeking to follow God must also seek to love others. We must trust that anyone who loves is also born of God.

Some of the discussion in latter part of this paper has been inspired by a study by Layton E. Williams [sojo.net/articles/10-bible-passages-teach-christian-perspective-homosexuality](http://sojo.net/articles/10-bible-passages-teach-christian-perspective-homosexuality)

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