

Combining Conviction with Compassion

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What does the Bible teach about homosexuality? Since I have been at this church, I have had to answer this question as well as a number of related questions multiple times. There have been dozens of people, both men and women, both heterosexuals and those who are conflicted about their own homosexual orientation, who have come to see me and expressed their own dilemmas about precisely this issue.

Some have come to see me as married people involved in secret homosexual relationships outside the bounds of their marriage. Some have come to see me as single people who have committed themselves to a pattern of celibacy. Some are single people who are sexually active as homosexuals. Others are people who are in committed homosexual relationships. In every case, each person asked questions regarding their faith and understanding of the Bible in relation to their homosexuality.

In this sense this question is not just for "them" but a question for believers.

To ground my sermon, I want to first consider some assumptions and experiences that I bring to the topic of homosexuality, and then I want us to look closely at what the Bible teaches.

Two guiding assumptions

My first assumption is Jesus Christ is Lord over all of life. There is no terrain of life somehow protected from Christ's interest. He is interested because he has made us. Jesus Christ is Lord over all of our lives, not just over some parts of it.

As we study the Gospels, we discover the lordship of Jesus Christ is expressed through his conviction and compassion. Christ's conviction and compassion are inseparable, and we never see them driven to extremes. If Christ was solely motivated by his convictions, his ministry, like the Scribes and Pharisees, would have resembled extreme judgmentalism. On the other hand, if Christ was only driven by his compassion, his ministry might have been viewed as mere sentimentality. Jesus holds together both conviction and compassion, and this is how he enacts his lordship to us.

Another assumption I affirm is the Bible is the Word of God and is to be our only guide in faith and practice. We're not talking therefore about anecdotal experiences that you or I may have had. There is an important place for discussion about the psychological, genetic, and social issues related to homosexuality, but we need to grapple more specifically with what the Bible teaches us. Instead of grasping for cultural consensus, we need to grasp what the Bible actually says.

I come to this topic with a set of experiences that are important to tell you about. From the time I was in grade school I had friends, both boys and girls, and parents of friends, who had homosexual relationships. For many years I have walked closely alongside people who find that their own orientation is for the same sex. In that sense, this subject comes as one that feels familiar to me. Throughout these years, I have confronted Christians who in the confession of their faith are absolutely orthodox but find themselves struggling with their homosexual orientation.

But alongside that is my experience of the authority of God's Word. I have recognized that my own experience and the experience of friends around me is not adequate authority to guide our lives. It is the authority of the Bible that has and must have the final say.

As I look at the integrity and faithfulness of many people in our congregation and elsewhere who are gay and Christian, I recognize the depth of the struggle amidst this subject and the sensitivity we need to have as we approach it.

Our understanding of human sexuality begins with creation, not with the Law

One danger in this issue is we often try to yank out of the Bible texts about homosexuality in a way that has no context. It is important that we place a discussion of homosexuality in the context of sexuality in general.

Understanding human sexuality begins with creation, not with the Law. Long before Scripture grapples with the questions "What am I expected to be" and "What am I expected to do?" Scripture answers the question "Who am I?"

One aspect of our created sexuality, as described in Genesis, is we are relational beings who seek intimate relationships. We have been made with the capacity for relationships with others and a relationship with God. Especially we are people made in the image of God with the capacity for intimacy with God.

The Bible says the first human being who enjoyed and experienced a relationship with creation and God searched and could not find in creation anyone who complemented was both the same and distinct from him. Out of the man's longing, God created woman.

In the early chapters of Genesis, we find both male and female, similar yet distinct, existing in a complementary relationship according to God's purpose and design. Male and female became an expression of the unity and the diversity of God. In relationships we experience the reality of the way that God, triunal in nature, exists.

Therefore our sexuality extends to every aspect of who we are as human beings and to every relationship. It is part of every conversation and every activity of our lives. We are never beings. We are always sexual.

The Bible affirms that genital sexuality is part of God's good the sake of pleasure, for the sake of intimacy and communion, and also for the sake of procreation. Through sexual lovemaking we are able to create another human life made in God's image. It's out of the complementarity of man and woman that God fashions this design.

The whole of who we are, including our bodies and sexuality, belongs to God. We don't have the prerogative to withhold part of ourselves from God. Jesus Christ is the Lord over all of life, and as the Creator he has made and given us this good gift of human sexuality.

So our understanding of human sexuality begins with creation, not with the Law, but when God does provide the Law, he provides the best design for our sexuality. Like a mirror, as the book of James says, the Law reflects the glory of God's creativity, the majesty of the way God made us, and the beauty with which we've been designed. At the same time, he reveals our brokenness and our willingness to live apart from God's will.

The Law makes clear that we all fall short and need the healing, forgiving love of Jesus Christ. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and our sexuality, as every other aspect of our lives, reflects that. It reflects it not just in the sense that it's broken, but in the sense that we are rebellious and rejecting of God. We want to take God's good gifts and use them not in the way God intended but in a selfish way.

Our entire selves are affected by sin, and all of us need redemption

Years ago an article was written in the "Times of London" entitled "What's wrong with the World?" The author of the article was grappling with some of the things that make the world a bad place. G. K. Chesterton wrote a letter to the editor following that piece and said, "I noted with interest the article that you published yesterday entitled 'What's wrong with the world?' I felt compelled to write and tell you: I am. Sincerely, G. K. Chesterton."

What's wrong with the world? I am. I am, in the whole of my being, as you are in the whole of your being. Therefore as we come to the issue of sexuality, we recognize that our lives, including our sexuality, are affected by sin, and all of us need redemption.

It's in that context that we come to the texts in the Bible that refer specifically to homosexuality.

It's noteworthy to acknowledge that the word "homosexuality" doesn't actually appear in the Bible. That word only came into existence in the late 1800s. What we instead find in the Bible are texts in which what is described is not what we would in our generation call homosexual orientation. Instead what is described are acts. The Bible provides examples of sexual activity but not examples of homosexual orientation.

There are a few important verses that discuss sexual activity, and we can group them into four categories: the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Genesis 19, and a parallel story in Judges 19; the Levitical texts, in Leviticus 18 and 20, which are part of what's referred to as the Holiness Code; Paul's depiction of the decadent pagan society, in Romans 1; and then Paul's pastoral letters in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1. These are the four major sections of biblical teaching on homosexuality. We're going to look briefly at just two.

Looking at Genesis 13 and 18, we find that early on Sodom is described as a place which is very sinful, and in the wider biblical context there's a clear affirmation of that. The question is "What is it God is angry about and, consequently, judges?" To answer this question, we should focus on Lot, who is Abraham's nephew. After he chooses the better part of the land, he ends up in Sodom and makes himself at home. We're told two angels come to Lot, and he welcomes them into his house. Later that

night, all of the men of Sodom gather around Lot's place, asking Lot to allow the two angels to come out to them, the text says, "so that they may know them."

The heart of the debate is around the word "know". The Scripture doesn't say, "So that they may have homosexual activity with them." It simply says, "That they may know them." What does that mean?

The Hebrew verb used there, "yada," appears 943 times in the Old Testament. Ten of those times the verb "know" refers to physical intercourse.

The argument is that because of the disproportionate number of times when the verb "yada" is used, it wouldn't be appropriate in this context to interpret it in a sexual way. Some say that Lot, a resident alien, has welcomed strangers, who are potentially threatening, into the community. Therefore, what the men of the community were really asking for was an opportunity to become acquainted with these strangers.

This case is further argued that in other places in the Old Testament, Sodom's sin is not referred to in terms of homosexuality. For example, Isaiah suggests that Sodom's sin is hypocrisy or social injustice. In Jeremiah it's depicted as a case of adultery and deceit. In Ezekiel, it's referred to as arrogance, greed, and indifference.

It's significant that Lot answers, "No, you can have my two daughters who have never been with a man." These arguments about the text in Genesis are worth hearing. At the same time, the depictions used here are serious enough and the language is significant enough that it seems to me that interpretation doesn't hold water.

The words used are "wicked" and "vile" and "disgraceful". The sin is certainly more than inhospitality. Secondly, the offer of women, in this particular case his daughters, is sexually connotative. If the men simply wanted to get acquainted with the strangers in their midst, he would not have offered his daughters, because he would be suggesting they could get acquainted with these women whom they are already familiar with. That just doesn't make sense.

Though it's true the verb "yada" is only used ten times in regard to physical intercourse, six of those ten times it is used in Genesis, and one of those six times is in this story. On a linguistic level, it's possible to argue that the other interpretation doesn't stand. In the New Testament, Jude affirms that the activity at Sodom was homosexual, although he suggests it was only one of many sinful activities of Sodom.

In Romans 1, Paul describes idolatrous pagans, people who could know God through the created universe but who reject him. Some would say what Paul is criticizing here in Romans 1 isn't those who are homosexual. Instead he's talking about people who are heterosexual by their natural inclination but living out their sexuality in a homosexual way. Therefore, the argument goes, it's unnatural because they are naturally heterosexual.

Some suggest Paul is arguing against promiscuity or against temple prostitution, which undoubtedly were part of the context.

But these arguments don't hold water. Paul's argument is rooted in a doctrine of creation. It's rooted in the reality of the way we have been made, not just in a cultural expression of certain things that may have been going on in the first century. Making the arguments I suggested would be to make arguments from silence, arguing about things Scripture doesn't comment on rather than what it does.

It's noteworthy that some translators show the heavy bias that this and other texts have been given. In verse 27, the last word is interesting: "Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for" and often that final word was translated "perversion." But the word is simply "error". It's not nearly as heavily judgmental as the word "perversion".

It's important to recognize that as Paul makes his case against homosexuality, he also argues there is a variety of ways in which the reality of God's good creation has been twisted by our poor acts and has come under God's judgment.

Therefore homosexual acts, in the Old and New Testaments, are seen as just one of many profound implications of the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity. If there is a hierarchy of sin, homosexuality isn't at the top; rather, pride, arrogance, and judgmentalism are at the top. We all fall short of the glory of God, and we all need grace. Each of us knows what it means to be a sinful sexual human being. Jesus allows no room for any of us to arrogantly say, "Well, that's not me. Good riddance to them. God's judgment is on them."

What we see, instead, is God pursuing people who sin. In Romans, Paul says, "It was while we were yet sinners that Christ died." God loves every human being.

Scripture gives no full explanation for why homosexual activity and orientation exists or why it isn't something God could use. God is under no obligation to provide us with all the explanation we may want.

At the end of the day after having studied and affirmed what Scripture has said, it doesn't mean I don't have many other questions. Yet Scripture gives us the opportunity to stand in the confidence that God has spoken to us about this important subject. And Scripture gives us no grounds for irrational fear and condemnation.

In many cases homosexuality is a sign of the brokenness of God's world more than it is of willful rebellion. I think of some of the people I have spoken with who in the integrity of their own hearts genuinely confess Jesus Christ to be Lord and seek to be faithful to him, but nevertheless find themselves gay.

What does that mean? How can that be? Again, there are many questions that need to be struggled with. Homosexuality, as I understand it biblically, is not God's design or will, but a reflection of the broken sinfulness of our humanity.



Sermons

It's in this context that as a community we seek to hold onto a biblical hope, a hope that is both for today and for tomorrow, a hope that is now and not yet, a hope that has some understanding and insight but also is incomplete and inadequate and waiting to be fulfilled. It is a holding on to both conviction and compassion.

My prayer for us as a church is that we would somehow have the courage, faithfulness, and love to both hold onto the reality of biblical conviction and to match it with the depth of biblical compassion and somehow together extend to all of us in our brokenness the grace and love of God that alone is adequate to make us the people God has intended us to be.