



Why I Believe Homosexual Practice Is a Sin

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A law was passed in February 2010 permitting two persons of the same sex to legally marry in Washington, D.C., where I reside, as is the case in several states. Late in 2010 President Barack Obama signed an executive order allowing U.S. military personnel to serve openly as gays or lesbians, effectively repealing the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. By these measures, homosexuality is not illegal; but as a matter of Christian faith and ethics, is it sinful?

Let me begin by stating that I do not believe homosexuality is a sin, if by homosexuality we mean same-sex orientation or attraction to persons of the same sex. To experience feelings of attraction to another individual of the same sex is not sinful. In my view, the sexual practice is sin, not the sexual preference. Homosexual couples can legally marry, but their sexual practices and partnerships are not affirmed by biblical teachings or standards. By the same token, while it may be socially acceptable in modern society for heterosexual couples to live together without being married, in biblical perspective they are “living in sin.” As a U.S. citizen, I respect the rights and personhood of homosexuals, but as an ordained pastor of a Christian congregation I cannot conduct marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples in good faith or good conscience.

I believe homosexual acts are sinful because of my reading of what the Bible teaches about sin and sexuality. There are only a few passages of scripture that mention homosexual acts, but in each case the homosexual act is presented as sinful. I have heard it argued many times that we should read biblical passages condemning homosexual acts in the same critical light with which we scrutinize passages concerning the subordination of women and slaves. However, for every biblical text that relegates women to silent subordination, there are many others that document the prophetic ministry and leadership of women, sometimes within the same book. For example, when Paul declares that “women should be silent in the churches” in 1 Corinthians 14:34, he questions the validity of that very statement two verses later: “Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?” Moreover, Paul assumes in 1 Corinthians 11:5 that women are not only speaking in the church, but praying and prophesying as he takes issue with their head covering: “But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved.”

Similarly, while there are several passages in the New Testament epistles where slaves are admonished to be obedient, many other passages of scripture attest to the liberation of slaves from bondage, whether bondage to human taskmasters or bondage to sin, as the work of God. So while women come to voice and slaves are set free in the pages of the Bible, nowhere in the Bible do we find texts that celebrate or endorse homosexual acts. Moreover, one New Testament text lists homosexual practice together with slave trading as examples of rebellious behavior that contradicts the gospel of God (1 Timothy 1:9-11).

What is sin? Simply stated, sin is the act of rebellion against God, and its consequences. In the biblical narrative, almost as soon as God created human beings they began to disobey God and separate themselves from God's authority and care. The first mention of homosexual practice occurs in Genesis 19, when the men of Sodom surround Lot's home and demand that he allow them to have sex with two angels who are his houseguests. Lot pleads with the men not to do this wicked act, and instead offers his own virgin daughters to them for sex. When the men attempt to break down the door to Lot's house, the angels strike them blind, rescue Lot and his household, then destroy Sodom, completing their divine mission. The epistle of Jude offers Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of people whose sexual immorality and perversion resulted in divine condemnation: "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 7)

Paul gives a theological explanation for homosexual practice in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans. In Paul's view, God has released men and women to commit sexual acts with each other as a consequence of their idolatry: "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another." (Romans 1:26-27) However, in the next chapter Paul quickly cautions believers who commit these same sins not to condemn the homosexual idolaters.

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? (Romans 2:1-3)

A similar sentiment is expressed in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he tempers his condemnation of homosexuals with the admonition that the sanctified people of God should show some compassion insofar as many of them committed the same acts before being "washed":

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were

justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9b-11)

Paul goes on to advise the believer to honor God with the body and refrain from sexual sin against one's own body, which should be regarded as the "temple" of the Holy Spirit.

Two texts in the book of Leviticus are often quoted as the Bible's key testimony against the sin of homosexual practice: (1) "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Leviticus 18:22) and (2) "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." (Leviticus 20:13) I cite these two texts last because they are so readily dismissed as Old Testament law whose standards and sanctions are irrelevant to the ethical practices of Christians. However, we can consider how Jesus dealt with sexual sins and the Old Testament law in the New Testament. It is often argued that Jesus nowhere condemns homosexual practice, and is silent on the question of same-sex marriage. My response is that Jesus endorsed and promoted heterosexual marriage with specific reference to God's intention for human sexuality in the Genesis story of creation, that two people should become one in covenanted heterosexual union. When the woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to face Jesus (in the conspicuous absence of her sexual partner) by a group of scribes and Pharisees, they asked Jesus to confirm and apply the Old Testament commandment to stone her to death as the penalty for her adultery. Jesus invited the one among them who is without sin to start the stoning. After the group of accusers retreated one-by-one in shamed silence, the woman was left alone with Jesus, who looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8:10-11) Jesus released her from condemnation, but admonished her not to sin again. In other words, while she was not punished for her sexual sin, her acquittal did not imply the absence of wrongdoing. She was released from condemnation, but her sexual act was morally unacceptable.

In conclusion, I offer John's account of Jesus' response to the woman caught in a sexual sin as a morally reliable guide for contemporary Christians who are concerned about how to deal with homosexuality: we should not condemn persons for their homosexual practices, but at the same time we must not deny the sinful nature of behavior that contradicts the consistent teachings of the Bible.

Sources for Further Reading:

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