

2018 MCI WPHS Symposium on Biblical Interpretation & Human Sexuality

“Same-sex relationships from an affirming interpretation of Scripture” – Paul Jeffrey

Initial Comments:

Regarding the “interpretation of Scripture”, it is important to acknowledge from the outset that there is no singular agreement on how one interprets Scripture. People observably approach Scripture in, quite often, radically different ways. Failure to acknowledge this from the outset will lead to a break down in dialogue from the outset. Indeed, it can make dialogue impossible. That is to say, if one were to approach the Bible in a literalistic way, as though the Bible was exactly dictated by God and faultlessly written down by human beings, to be followed to the letter, then they are at a completely different starting point to someone who views the Bible as a library of literature that developed throughout the ages as result of a creative dialogue between ancient traditions and different communities. And to be clear, the example that I have given is not an example of a so-called High View of Scripture versus a so-called Low View of Scripture, which are misleading labels, and often reveal something of the ideology of the person who employs them. A truly high view of Scripture is always an honest view of Scripture; that is, honest about what the Bible is and where the Bible came from.

Another comment, that I would like to make, which ties in with what I have said about the variety of ways in which people interpret the Bible, is that we do not actually have, in our possession, one, singular, definitive Bible. We never have. I once heard a story about a lecturer, who had before him several Bibles. He picked up the NIV and he said, “This is not the Bible.” The class didn’t necessarily disagree with that assertion. Then he picked up the Good News version and he said, “This is not the Bible”. Then he picked up the NRSV and he said, “This is not the Bible”. People started to shift a bit awkwardly then. Then he picked up the King James Version and he said, “This is not the Bible.” I can only imagine the gnashing of teeth at that point. There is no, one, singular, definitive Bible. There are numerous versions, in numerous different languages. Some Bibles include books that other Bibles do not. And the texts have been edited and have had new additions as they were developed.

I find that when we accept that there is and has never been a definitive, overarching interpretation of scripture, and that people have always found a way to make the Bible say whatever they want (justifying slavery and the suppression of women come to mind), then the harder it is to hold on to the Bible as a weapon, and the harder it is to hold on to the Bible as something to hide behind, and the more we have to take responsibility and stand by what we say and what we do.

What does the Bible say about same-sex relationships?

Firstly, it is important to make the distinction between “how the Bible reads” and “what the Bible says”. I have often heard people say that a simple interpretation of scripture is to interpret how the Bible reads as exactly correlating with what the Bible says. But this is far

from simple. Why? Because if we did so, then we would have to conclude that the Bible permits us to keep slaves, to have as many wives as we want plus concubines, oh yes, and wives are property. We can also sell our daughters. It commands us to execute people who collect sticks on the Sabbath. It forbids us from eating certain foods. It is an abomination to eat shellfish or wear clothes of different fabrics. Men can't shave and have to be circumcised. Women must be expelled to the edge of town when they are menstruating. You can't have bank accounts either, because that's usury and that's condemned in the Bible. Ah, but most of that is Old Testament, you may say. We are free from the obligations of the Law. Very well. Even so, you are still forbidden from having any private property. You can't get divorced for anything other than infidelity. And while marriage is not forbidden, it would appear to be discouraged. Far from the simple interpretation, I am sure you would agree.

Discovering "what the Bible says" beyond "how the Bible reads" is a continual challenge for all people of faith. For the Christian, Jesus is key to this. Just as there is not one definitive Bible, nor one definitive interpretation of the Bible, there is also no one definitive understanding of Jesus. Perhaps the most inclusive description of Jesus from a Christian perspective is the view that God was revealed most completely through Jesus. As such, Jesus is our most important interpretive tool for getting beyond "how the Bible reads" and getting closer to "what the Bible says". However, we must accept that there are certain questions that face us today, such as same-sex marriage, that are simply beyond the Bible's frame of reference. So, with that in mind, what does the Bible say about monogamous same-sex relationships as we would understand and recognise today? Precisely nothing.

There a small number of references to certain types of homosexual behaviour throughout the entirety of the Bible, none referring to same-sex relationships as we understand them today, and many are rooted in a subconscious or very overt male sexist hatred for women.

Old Testament – Genesis 19, and Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13

Sodom and Gomorrah

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is often cited as an argument against same-sex relationships. But actually, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah displays no such thing. Let's familiarise ourselves with the passage.

The Depravity of Sodom

19 *The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." ³ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. 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.

This is a complex story. But, this, in no way, describes a same-sex relationship as we would understand it. It depicts an attempted gang rape. And that Lot would offer his daughters to be raped in the place of the two visitors says a lot more about how little women mattered than it does about male homosexual sex. The great sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not same-sex relationships. No, this story depicts cities who disregarded God’s law regarding caring for the stranger, for the foreigner, for the immigrant. That the male citizens would seek to gang rape angels of the Lord is an extreme symbol representing the rejection of the hospitality laws. Moreover, the sexual act threatened was not from sexual desire, rather as an act of dominance and humiliation. It would have been common, for instance, in battle for the victorious army to rape the defeated soldiers. There is perhaps a hint to this fear in 1 Samuel, when King Saul commits suicide on the battlefield rather than being found alive by the Philistines, for fear of what they would do to him.

Leviticus

Moving to Leviticus, in chapter 18 verse 22 and chapter 20 verse 13, the act of a man lying with another man instead of his wife is described as an “abomination”. Incidentally, these represent the sum total of what the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, says about same-sex activities. Firstly, the image here is of a married man committing adultery with another man instead of his wife – not what we would understand about sexual orientation and not what we understand as same-sex relationship today. Note also the total disregard of female sexuality.

This particular example of male homosexual sex is described as *to’ebah*, translated as an “abomination”. To put that in the context, other things that were regarded as *to’ebah* abominations were having sex with your wife while she was menstruating; taking your wife’s sister as a second wife; sacrificing your child to the god Molech; Hebrews eating with Egyptians; and eating pork. Also banned, trimming your beard; interbreeding animals of different species; mocking the blind; wearing mixed-fabric clothing; eating shellfish; and tattoos. Demonstrably, quite a diverse set of law and customs. Some make perfect sense. It’s wise not to sacrifice your child to Molech. Fooling around with your sister-in-law will only end in tears. But we’ll not stick to prohibitions on pork, wool-silk blends, or trimming or shaving your beard, and increasingly so with tattoos. It would be hypocritical to take this one, ancient for-instance regarding a particular male homosexual sex act, and use it as a timeless truth that denies the morality and legitimacy of same-sex relationships – particularly if you are a clean-shaven man who enjoyed a bacon toastie for breakfast this morning.

New Testament – Romans 1.26-27, 1 Corinthians 6.9-10, 1 Timothy 1.10

It is worth noting that Jesus has nothing to say about homosexuality or same-sex relationships. The verses pulled in out of context to argue against same-sex relationships are found in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy. Let's remind ourselves of these verses:

Romans 1.26-27

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷ and 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.

1 Corinthians 6.9-10

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.

1 Timothy 1.8-10

⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. 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, ¹⁰ fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹ that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

These texts represent the remainder of the biblical references to same-sex activity. They would have been written approximately between 50 and 110 CE. The fact that they were written within the Roman Empire is very significant. It was an accepted custom in Roman culture that male same-sex attraction was normal, though it would not have been understood and expressed in the context of a same-sex relationship as we would understand it today. For instance, even if a wealthy man was already married to a woman, he might have a young male lover. Indeed, male mentors would often have a sexual relationship with their students – that is sex with boys – that is a custom that we would all reject as unnatural and sexually immoral today. The real taboo with male-male sexual activity was motivated by sexism – who would play the “woman.” For a man to be seen as feminine was shameful. Even today, if a man is referred to as being feminine, it is rarely taken as a compliment. We must also take into account that the same-sex activity that Paul refers to may also be referring to temple prostitutes, that is sexual activity in the context of pagan worship – and not same-sex activity in the context of a same-sex relationship as we would understand today, as Paul would have had no concept of this.

Regarding 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, there has been much debate surrounding the interpretation of the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* or *arsenokoitais*. In the NRSV, *malakoi* is translated in 1 Corinthians as “male prostitutes” – however it is thought that a more literal translation of the word is “soft” or “effeminate”. *Arsenokoitai* and *arsenokoitais* are both translated as “sodomites” in the NRSV, although there is no neat consensus on what the word means. It has been understood as meaning homosexual, describing male homosexuality, describing anal sex, describing masturbation, describing male prostitution, describing boy sex-slaves and describing paedophiles. You don’t need me to point out to you just how wildly these potential translations vary. Translating this word as “homosexual” is misleading. Partly because the potential translations vary so wildly. Partly because the most literal translation is “male bed(s)” and not “same sex”. Moreover, it is very unlikely that Paul would have had any concept of sexual orientation. This certainly does not describe a same-sex relationship as we would understand today.

In many respects, the debate over the exact meaning of the Greek words is all academic anyway. It is often a technique employed by religious conservatives and fundamentalists to blind you with the science of language relating to the original Hebrew or Greek of the biblical texts. And while there is some light that can be shed from this approach, this approach often disregards the fact that these words, with all their nuances, were written in a very different world to ours. We know more about the world today. We know more about ourselves today. We know about sexual orientation today.

It is also interesting to note that there have been scholars who have posited that Paul may have been repressing his own sexuality. There have also been scholars who have questioned the passion in which Paul disapproved of homosexuality or same-sex activity. It may be that Paul is using language like “soft” and “effeminate” in the context of same-sex activity as a rhetorical slur against Roman culture, not entirely unlike how some people might criticise a man’s sporting prowess by saying “you throw like a girl” or who say “that’s gay” when they are describing something that they generally disapprove of, or, again to disparage something that they deem to be “unmanly” or “girly”. We cannot ignore the sexism that influences a lot of homophobia. But there is a rhetoric to Romans 1 for instance, which refers to idolatry. It could be the case that referring to “unnatural” same-sex acts is not only an attack on a pagan ritual, but also indicates a wider distrust of and an attack on Roman culture, and a criticism that the faithful have become “too Roman.” Be that as maybe, neither Romans, 1 Corinthians, nor 1 Timothy would appear to be referring to same-sex relationships as we would understand them.

Conclusion

There is no basis for discriminating against people in same-sex relationships from a biblical perspective. In this talk I have referenced 6 verses which are most commonly used by religious conservatives and fundamentalists as a basis for their prejudice against same-sex relationships and the LGBTQ+ community more widely. These 6 verses account for roughly 0.016% of the whole Bible. Compare this to the 2000 plus verses related to wealth, loans, property and greed; and to the 100 plus verses that focus solely on caring for widows. And yet, on the basis of 6 verses, 6 verses that do not refer to same-sex relationships as we

understand them, the Bible has been used as a weapon. And it has also been used a shield by so-called moderates to hide behind. And the results have been damaging to a significant number of people. Consider those who have suffered from depression, who have suffered from substance abuse, who have committed suicide, who have become estranged from and rejected by their parents and their families and their friends and their churches on the basis of warped church teaching, on the basis of a particular, fundamentalist understanding of these 6 verses, and of the warped desire of adherents of a particular, fundamentalist ideology that seek to exert power and control over individuals to Orwellian proportions. Truly, the church should be ashamed and repent for the destructiveness and abusiveness it has propagated in the name of God, due to spite, ignorance, and cowardice. When the biblical argument against same-sex relationships is so weak, and when we see how damaging this weak argument has been to individuals and families, and when we see most of the democratic western world embracing equal marriage and making progress on LGBTQ+ issues, I can't figure out for the life of me why conservative Christians insist on making life miserable for a permanent minority. Then again, prejudice has never had a rational basis. I am confident that the tide will turn within Christianity eventually. I pray that it is not too late. For every time the church is the last to change, it will force more people away, and cease to be a relevant voice. If the church is always the last to change, I fear for a future in which Christianity as we know it will have morphed into an obscure alt-right movement. For many people today, the church has long been that way.

Finally, regarding LGBTQ+ Christians, I have been fortunate enough to know many. And I can tell you that from my experience they are among some of the finest people, and finest Christians, that I have met. And it is not in spite of their sexuality. It is because of it. And they have had to put up with a lot of crap from straight Christians, from people who would demand that LGBTQ+ people live a half-life, a lonely life, a life of suppression and shame, all the while insisting that their feelings and sensibilities are spared and that they are not called homophobic. In order to worship, LGBTQ+ Christians have had to put up with self-professed liberals and moderates who say, "gay people are welcome to come to church, but they can't read the Bible, they can't carry the cross, they can't hold an office, they can't celebrate their relationship in a religious context, they can't have a relationship at all actually, and they certainly can't be minister; but they can sit in the back, and they can be grateful that we were gracious enough to let them through the door." I have nothing but admiration for the strength, and the courage, and the determination, and the heart of LGBTQ+ Christians who never gave up on God, and continued and continue to worship God in faithful defiance.