

Debating Bible Verses on Homosexuality

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Two evangelical authors offer conflicting interpretations about well-known passages on homosexuality.

The debate over gay marriage is not just taking place in the nation's courts – it is also a subject of intense discussion in the nation's churches.

Matthew Vines, an openly gay, evangelical Christian and the author of “God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships,” has been actively encouraging conservative Christians to re-evaluate their beliefs about homosexuality. He has engaged them in private conversations, in public talks and through the organization he founded, the Reformation Project.

He was recently invited by the Rev. Caleb Kaltenbach, lead pastor of Discovery Church in Simi Valley, Calif., to talk privately with a small group of evangelical leaders to discuss what the Bible says about gay relationships. Mr. Kaltenbach is the author of the forthcoming book “Messy Grace,” which is about how he reconciles his conservative Christian convictions with his experience as the child of gay parents.

After the session, they were each asked to interpret some of the most cited verses relating to homosexuality in the Bible. (Text from the New International Version, 1984 edition.)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/05/us/samesex-scriptures.html>

Suggested Reading about understanding scripture:

Making Sense of the Bible by Adam Hamilton

Contact Gail Spach in the church library for additional resources.

Interested in a Bible study resource? Contact Rev. Linda Zastovnik.

1. ROMANS 1:26-27

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.



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In this passage, Paul, who was quite familiar with biblical and secular views of sexual orientation, says that having sex with someone of the same gender is a sin. Some interpret this passage as a reference to heterosexuals who exchanged their natural sexual orientation for that which was not natural to them. The word that Paul uses for “natural” is not referring to what is natural to a specific person, but rather what is natural in light of God's intent for the sexual design of humanity. Ultimately, the passage serves as an introduction to verses 28-32, where Paul lists many other general sins that ultimately show our need for the Gospel.

Paul is explicit that the same-sex behavior in this passage is motivated by lust. His description is similar to the common ancient idea that people “exchange” opposite-sex for same-sex relations because they are driven by out-of-control desire, not because they have a different sexual orientation. And while Paul labels same-sex behavior “unnatural,” he uses the same word to criticize long hair in men in 1 Corinthians 11:14, which most Christians read as a synonym for “unconventional.” Christians should continue to affirm with Paul that we shouldn't engage in sexual behavior out of self-seeking lustfulness. But that's very different than same-sex marriages that are based on self-giving love, and we shouldn't conflate the two in how we interpret this text today.

2. LEVITICUS 18:22

*Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman;
that is detestable.*



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God’s prohibition always has positive intentions. While no longer under the Law, Christians see the Law as a moral compass with principles for holy living. The Bible doesn’t have middle ground on same-sex relationships, monogamous or not. God reserves sex for marriage between a man and woman, because sex is a unique foundation of intimacy. Imagine all the evils, struggles and pain that could be avoided in relationships if we really followed God’s principles. When sex is only seen as a benefit for individuals rather than a foundation of social structures, it becomes selfish and manipulative.

Christ fulfilled the Old Testament law, and the New Testament teaches that Christians should live under the new covenant rather than the old one. Consequently, this verse has never applied to Christians. For a man to lie with a man “as with a woman” violated the patriarchal gender norms of the ancient world, which is likely why Leviticus prohibited it. But the New Testament casts a vision of God’s kingdom in which the hierarchy between men and women is overcome in Christ. So not only is Leviticus’s prohibition inapplicable to Christians on its own, the rationale behind it doesn’t extend to Christians, either.

3. MATTHEW 19:3-6

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”



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Jesus says that marriage is between a man and a woman by quoting Genesis 1:27. He affirms that God created sexual distinction between man and woman and this distinction serves as part of the foundation for marriage (helping to make Adam and Eve suitable partners). Spiritually, this distinction ultimately points to Jesus and the cross, where Jesus (the bridegroom) would pledge his love for his church (the bride) on the cross. As Jesus' words are binding for today, remember that there was no individual in the Bible called to be celibate that was not honored by God, including Paul, John the Baptist and Jesus himself.

Jesus responds to a question about divorce by emphasizing the permanence of the marriage bond. He was asked about a man and his wife, and he responds accordingly, by referring to male and female. Same-sex marriage wasn't on the radar screen in the biblical world, so it's not surprising that neither Jesus nor any of the biblical writers addresses it. Therefore, Christians today have to ask whether gay relationships can fulfill the core principles of Scripture's teachings about marriage. Based on Jesus' teaching here and other texts like Ephesians 5, the essence of Christian marriage involves keeping covenant with one's spouse in order to reflect God's covenant with us through Christ. That's something same-sex couples can and do live out today.

4. 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.



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These words are found in the Greek translation of Leviticus 18 (which is what Paul would've used as a source when writing this letter). His phrase “men who have sex with men” is the Greek word *arsenokoitai*. It's a compound: *arseno* means “a male,” and *koitai* means “bed.” The word means “male bed”—or homosexuality. Though what Paul says might be offensive, he never intended to impose these values on non-Christians. In the current debate of same-sex marriage, there's an imposition of a meta-narrative being imposed from non-Christians to Christians. Should we violate our conscience and teachings of Scripture because of an agenda that labels us narrow-minded? That seems like an unfair expectation to me.

In this text, Paul uses two Greek words—*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*—that likely refer to some forms of male same-sex behavior, but not the modern concept of homosexuality. The predominant forms of same-sex behavior in the ancient world were sex between masters and slaves, sex between adult men and adolescent boys, and prostitution. In all those cases, men used sex to express power, dominance and lustfulness, not self-giving love and mutuality. Committed same-sex unions between social equals represent very different values than the types of same-sex behavior Paul would have had in view in 1 Corinthians 6.