



PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF 21st CENTURY
HOMOSEXUALITY:
AN APPLICATION OF INTEGRATED BIBLICAL ETHICS

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I want to begin this discussion with a plea for Christians to come to this topic—first—with a repentant heart. There has been no area of my life, when I honestly approach it with the piercing guidance of the Holy Spirit, that I have not needed to prayerfully adjust my walk with Christ. If we approach any area of our lives without the commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to mold and better us, we are missing out of the joyous gift of being disciples of the Most High. It is there, in that place of personal humility and God’s sovereign aid, that I believe we can find hope in a conversation so abused, my generation has all but given up.

Homosexuality is a hot topic in our culture. From the Supreme Court’s--stunning—display of judicial activism, to church denominations accrediting practicing homosexuals, to culturally highlighted bullying and violence toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community; the voices of this topic are profound, loud, and demanding our attention.¹ It is important that we first start with careful analysis on what God’s Word says before giving heed to these other voices. It was the regular practice of Jesus of Nazareth to answer challenging questions with deep, insightful responses from Scripture; let us here attempt the same. The first half of this paper will look at the central

¹ Malcolm, Presbyterian Church (USA) votes to ordain gays.

scriptures that address the topic of homosexuality (Gen 19; Lev 18:22 and 20:13; I Cor 6:9-11; I Tim 1:10; and Rom 1:18-32), and outline the basic arguments presented by both traditionalist and revisionist camps. The second half will discuss examples of pastoral application and insight based on these scriptures.

Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorrah—

Deriving theology from the rather spectacular story of Sodom and Gomorrah's sin, and God's destructive judgment, requires consideration of a few different questions. First, is the Hebrew word "yada" (found at the end of v. 5) proof of homosexual intent by the men of Sodom?² The simple answer is yes. Even though "yada" is used in the text as a euphemism and not a direct statement, the following verse makes the homosexual euphemism clear beyond doubt.³ With that established, the next question is whether the narrative is generally condemning homosexuality as sin, or just homosexual rape?

Here there is no simple answer, and both sides have valid points. Traditionalists argue that the reading in of homosexual-rape as the focus of the sin to the Gen 19 account doesn't make sense with the language of the passage. This argument relies on the contrast between universally clear language to depict acts of rape in the OT, and the lack of any clear use of the word "yada" in the text to represent rape as the intent.⁴ This argument shifts the sin of the Sodomites away from rape and allows the traditionalist to associate the fiery

² Compare *have sex with them* (TNIV) and the more generic *know them* (NRSV).

³ In reference to the conclusion that "yada" has no sexual meaning: "This interpretation can only be evaluated as wild and fanciful. For when Lot responds by offering his daughters 'who have never known a man' (v. 8), it becomes clear that the issue is intercourse and not friendship. (Hamilton, *Book of Genesis*, pg. 34).

⁴ *Ibid* 34-35

judgment of God more directly with the act of homosexuality. The revisionist argument focuses on the violent atmosphere present in the text, and draws in the parallel story in Judges 19 to make the intent of the text clearly focused on homosexual rape.⁵ In addition, revisionists point to the complete lack of reference to homosexuality in other biblical references to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁶ Interestingly, the revisionist argument claims to be free from the conclusions of this argument as they feel this text cannot be related to the 21st century discussion.⁷

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13—

There are two important hurdles that must be crossed successfully if we are to apply Levitical passages properly. First, is a clear understanding of the offense warranting the law, and the underlying moral or ethic that drives it. Second, is clear theology that justifies what we apply from Leviticus. This cannot simply be a preferential pick and choose approach; this point is important, as there must be some logic behind eating shellfish being an archaic offense, but incest being currently relevant. If there are specific verses the revisionist argument should demand additional scrutiny from the reader, it is these two Levitical commands. First, it is abundantly clear from both the position of the scriptures in the passage (offenses worthy of capital punishment), and the Hebrew word “to’evah” often translated as “abomination” that this a law with severe importance. There are arguments

⁵ Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* 61

⁶ *Ibid* 61-62

⁷ “...Christians should also recognize that these stories are of no more value in assessing lifelong, loving, committed same-sex relationships than stories of heterosexual rape can used to morally evaluate loving heterosexual relationships. The failure to distinguish between consensual, committed, and loving sexual relationships and violent, coercive relationships represents a serious case of moral myopia.” (Brownson *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* 268)

by revisionists like Gushee who claim “to’evah” has a different (much milder meaning) than the average reader would think on hearing “abomination.”⁸ I hold these arguments are in danger of provable bias. The rub here is that they contradict the key exegetical principle of **respecting context**; avoidance of the scriptural context of capital punishment to these verses—to downplay “to’evah”—is to unnecessarily place the language of the text against the immediate context. Suffice it to say, the commands of 18:22 and 20:13 are among the most serious offenses the Levitical law addresses.

The question that follows then, is, “Is there any biblical hint as to **why** God finds male-male sex an abhorrent act and worthy of capital punishment?” As Gushee rightly points out, the moral reasoning behind these laws is contested in scholarship.⁹ Gushee’s following revisionist argument is complicated, and focuses predominantly on challenging traditionalists to clearly explain how they theologically apply some Levitical commands and not others.¹⁰ It is significant to note, however, that Gushee fails to address the difference in the Jewish position to salvation and the NT churches’ position as a means for interpreting and applying the text. This is a huge oversight for the revisionist argument, and one that should warrant serious consideration. If the traditionalist can make an argument for interpretation based on the change in salvational position through Christ’s atonement, the revisionist position on these passages is severely weakened.

To paraphrase and highlight another key point in the revisionist argument made by James Brownson: it is highly unlikely that the “why” (whatever it might be) can be ethically

⁸ Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* 65-66

⁹ Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* 66

¹⁰ *Ibid* 64-72

relevant to committed, monogamous, 21st century gay relationships as they were not existent within that historical framework.¹¹ This is an argument based on the focus inherent in the passage to avoiding the wicked practices of the surrounding nations. From that basis, Brownson shows that male-male sex was predominantly connected to various idolatries and religious prostitution, and therefore argues that the ethic is protecting Israel from these practices, and not condemning committed male-male sexual relationships.¹²

The traditionalist would hold in counter that even if the historical intention doesn't relate to the current day, the guidelines for behavior are still as applicable as the guidelines on incest and bestiality. A good example of this line of thinking from Wenham is: "The reason why these laws apply to us and others do not, lies in our situation. Men's moral predicaments change very little with time. We still need guidelines to regulate man's treatment of his fellow men. But the believer's situation with regard to salvation has altered drastically; there is no need to continue with animal sacrifice now that the true Lamb of God has appeared."¹³

To summarize, both Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are important passages to consider, but pose significant theological challenges both in underlying ethical understanding and modern application. While it is certainly too much to throw out the possibility of these passages being crucially important to the larger discussion, I believe it is unlikely that there will be clear scholarly agreement in our time.

¹¹ Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* 273

¹² *Ibid*, Brownson: "There is evidence linking same-sex eroticism, particularly among males, to cultic prostitution and other idolatrous practices in the ancient world generally; there is no literary evidence for consensual (270)

¹³ Wenham, *Book of Leviticus* 261

1 Corinthians 6:9-11, I Timothy 1:10; and Romans 1:18-32—

These three passages mark an important shift in the scriptural discussion: all are NT, and thus more accessible to the modern Church on a theological level. I have grouped the analysis in this section because all three passages are by the same author, and because they all revolve around lists of sinful pagan practices. The arguments for 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10 are much simpler than those of Romans 1:18-32, so let us begin there. It is key to understand—both for the passage and the revisionist argument—that there are several different words used to describe the sinful homosexual practices in these two passages.¹⁴ Brownson argues that the use of these different words is a specific attempt by the text to describe particular practices of the time, and not homosexuality in general.¹⁵ This argument distances the passage from any modern ethical application toward same-sex relationships by professed Christians. The traditionalist—who doesn't acknowledge the probable relationship of the passage to Roman cultural practices of pederasty, prostitution and sexual slavery—is missing a key piece in understanding Paul's attempt to separate Christians from the pagan practices of the time.

Traditionalists still take clear stances on the homosexual focus on these passages—Philip Towner on 1 Timothy and Richard Hays on 1 Corinthians for example—but it can definitely be debated.¹⁶ Additionally, Gushee points to constant disagreement at the highest

¹⁴ Compare their translations in NRSV, TNIV, NIV, NASB, ESV, KJV and NKJV.

¹⁵ Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* 273-274

¹⁶ Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* 275; Towner, *The Letters of Timothy and Titus* 50-51; Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament* 382

level of scholarship.¹⁷ Unless the traditionalist takes a radical interpretation of these passages, neither the traditionalist nor the revisionist is directly at odds; both positions hold that the sinful practices of homosexual activity at the time are abhorrent and anti-biblical. That is not to say these passages do not color overall biblical theology, just that there is much less conflict here between these two camps than could first be assumed. And serious difficulties are present in using 1 Corinthians and I Timothy to decide moral ethics relative to 21st century homosexuality.

Now we turn our attention to possibly the most decisive passage in canonical scripture to the current day issue of homosexuality: Romans 1:18-32. What sets this pericope apart from all the others is the direct ethical appeal. Here, instead of simple separation from pagan sexual customs, the appeal is to what is sexually “natural” and “unnatural.”¹⁸ Before either the traditionalist or the revisionist makes their argument, they have to acknowledge that the underlying sin (which is thematic for both chapters one and two of Romans) is rebellion.¹⁹ This can be used to connect the abandonment of the “natural” to abandonment of God’s will. This is further made clear by the reference to God as “Creator,” which Hays argues places the passage for the reader within the context of

¹⁷ Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*: “Very high-level scholarly uncertainty about the meaning and translation of these two Greek words, together with profound cultural and linguistic differences, undermines claims to the conclusiveness of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* for resolving the LGBT issue.” (80)

¹⁸ See Romans 1:26-27 NIV translation; Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*: (the following as a good traditionalist approach to defining “natural/unnatural”): “It can connote what people are by birth or character: ‘We who are Jews by birth (*physei*, lit. ‘by nature’) and not sinful Gentiles (Gal 2:15)’ [and] All of us also lived among them at one time,

¹⁹ Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics* “The rampant immorality of the Gentile world, Paul argued, was symptomatic, rather than foundational, consequence rather than cause, flowing from this rebellion against God. In detailing what he clearly considered a shocking morass of immoral and unnatural behaviors, he lifted up both male and female homosexual acts for special attention” (308)

Genesis 1-3.²⁰ Therefore I will argue that the behavior (Paul is discussing in Rom 1:26-27) should be primarily viewed as rebellion to God's design, and not limited simply to historical Roman/pagan context. The traditionalist will also point to Paul's apparent highlighting of homosexual acts as principal examples before the longer vice list. Traditionalists can also make a fair argument that the generality of Paul's language on homosexual activity allows for a wide birth of application.²¹ Therefore, the abandonment of God's design of sexuality for homosexual behavior is ethically an act of rebellion.

This rebellion from God's design is a central vein to traditionalist stances, and I hold much harder to contest than the first five passages we have looked at. I hold this for three reasons. First, there is no example of positive homosexual behavior in the Bible--of any kind--and that inevitably reinforces male-female as God's chosen design and gives no evidence for the revisionist to draw on. Second, because the design argument doesn't rely on underlying ethic, it **is** the underlying ethic. Even if the revisionist could say that the traditionalist evidence for God's design aren't solid, that still does not undo the fact that heterosexual union is the **only** biblical design, and therefore their arguments can never place homosexual union within the design.²²

It is of note that Vines makes an observation (possibly accurate) that Romans 1:26-27 is talking more about moderation than orientation.²³ But, even if homosexual orientation

²⁰ Hays, *Moral Vision* 386

²¹ Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*: "Paul probably did know at least several different types of homosexual practices among both men and women. He used general language in Rom. 1 because he intended his proscription to apply in a general way to all homosexual behavior, as he understood it" (110).

²² See Vine's argument in *God and the Gay Christian* page 27 for an example of this revisionist argument.

²³ *Ibid* 115

is not the moral focus of the passage, the design ethic used to address the sin—whatever the sin may be—is easily applicable to the larger homosexuality discussion. As revisionists clearly state—over and over—that neither the Bible nor ancient eastern culture specifically address committed loving same gender sexual relationships, I argue that by doing this they are actually reinforcing the polarization of homosexuality from God’s design. God’s design for sexuality is limited entirely to celibacy and male-female covenantal union.

One revisionist approach points to the claim (although treated like fact in the argument) that homosexuals are naturally attracted to the same Gender, and thus acting out their attraction is not an act of overcoming **personal** natural order. This does nothing to deal with the problem (admitted by the revisionist Brownson)²⁴ that the personal homosexual natural state is unnatural to the majority of creation, but highlights a key topical element that should inform pastoral application.

Pastor application given by my professor—

- **PASTORAL APPLICATION**—Robert and his husband, Peter, visit your church one Sunday morning, holding hands. They have recently been legally married by the State and moved to your city for employment. They both say they love Jesus and were readily accepted at their affirming Christian church in Portland. They even want to serve as an usher and guitar player. What would you say in response to their “marriage...love for Jesus...desire to serve...hand holding at church”? Would you ask them to not attend based upon I Corinthians 5? Would you let them stay...but with certain defined boundaries? Would you “barter with them about church attendance” and if so with what parameters?

Let’s look at the overall implications of the above biblical ethics on a few down to earth scenarios and questions. *Is it possible to be a “born again gay Christian”? If so, will they “go to heaven” if they regularly practice homosexual activity?* This is a common

²⁴ Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* 232

question whose answer is not—and should not be—tied to the specifics of homosexual activity. The real question is whether or not a new convert who does not repent and change was ever saved to begin with. A question, I believe it is fair to say, is ultimately determined not by the Church, but by God (see Rev 20:12-15). I will yield that (certain) homosexual activity is a seriously treated sin in the biblical text, but that is the only special bearing it has on this question. A question, it can be noticed, is a serious one for pastoral consideration in numerous other areas (drug/alcohol addiction, pornography, fornication, thievery, etc.).

The New Testament, almost holistically, treats justification and sanctification as an inseparable pair; you cannot have one without the other. The mistake we can make then, is thinking each cause the other because of the required pairing. That is not the case. Justification is not caused by sanctification,²⁵ it is caused by the unconditional saving power of Christ's resurrection in our lives.²⁶ Is it possible for thieves to come to Christ without fully removing that sin from their lives? Absolutely. This is the very majesty and completeness of the Cross. Therefore, to tell anyone they are not saved because of existent sin is neither the place of a believer nor compatible with NT salvation theology.

Do you believe in sexual orientation from birth? If someone says, “No,” to this question, it is their responsibility to defend their reasoning. This is an incredibly hard position to defend (as most pastors are not leading researchers in the field of genetics and sexual psychology), and one that overall distracts from the biblical focus of the six relevant passages. Therefore, pastors would be wise to not say, “No.” Instead, a valid response is

²⁵ Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* 224-229

²⁶ Towner, *The Letters of Timothy & Titus* 255

“the Bible does not focus on sexual orientation or preference, and neither do I.” How people are sexually inclined—from birth onward—should not affect our applied biblical ethic in ministry. It is also worth pointing out that the Bible does not define any level of identity to sexuality, but clearly places human identity as made in God’s image. To say you do not define identity by sexuality, but by Genesis 1:26, is both a fair statement and a crucially needed approach by the 21st century church.

Would you advise conversion or reparative therapy for a Christ-follower struggling with their sexual orientation? First, we should tell anyone considering this: **that the Bible makes no demands that we adjust sexual preference.** The Bible does not shame people who are attracted to the same gender, and allowing anyone to act out of a perceived shame in this area would be unwise and borderline unethical. It is ethically imperative for any topic that we do not allow misuse of Scripture to shame someone who has not explicitly violated any biblical law or guideline. OT law places extreme importance on defending those that have differences or weaknesses that make them easy to abuse or be deprived of societal rights or protections. In the Church, the LGBT community is an opportunity to live this ethic out. We should not miss it. It is also important to point out that conversion and reparative therapy can cause harm to a client up to suicidal actions.²⁷ It is also worthy to note that numerous psychological and professional organizations have taken various degrees of opposition to reparative therapies.²⁸ To put this into pastoral application: to

²⁷ *Sexual Conversion Therapy*” Haldeman: “It is important, however, to document that conversion therapy practices can have adverse consequences--some very serious--on numerous individuals. These range in severity from poor self-esteem, to chronic unhappiness in relationships and up to suicide.” pg 128

²⁸ These include the American Psychiatric Association, American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, American Counseling Association, and the National Association of Social Workers. See page 204 of Shidlo, *Sexual Conversion Therapy*

advise or require any type of sexual alteration therapies is to place someone in possible danger.

Should a pastor apply I Corinthians 5 to a practicing homosexual in their church?

It is always an option to expel someone from a church, but good theology derived from Paul's direction in 1 Corinthians 5 would—at the very least—require two things: that exclusion only be used when all other options have failed, and then only under the objective of using the discipline to the ends of restoring the believer to righteousness and fellowship.²⁹ To not approach this topic on a case by case basis with fervent effort to avoid exclusion is to miss the nature and intent of this passage. It is also important to note that 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 would discourage any exclusion of the unsaved or those outside the church community for any reason; for the topic of this paper that would mean regular attendance of unsaved, practicing gays/lesbians is chiefly God's responsibility to judge.

Conclusion—

In closing let me offer three pastoral stances I believe are essential in order to take this conversation successfully off of the page and into the church. First, pastors have to maintain the willingness--humility--to recognize that there are areas that they do not fully understand, and will have to take an approach of continued learning. Don't miss this possible victory; any evident humility will draw people through the church doors and help keep them there. Second, is a priority on loving the individual and defining them by *Imago Dei* and sonship through Christ, not through sexual identity. Third, is a reliance on the Holy

²⁹ See page 221 of *The First letter to the Corinthians* (Roy E, Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner.)
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Spirit and prayer. To turn to God for aid in difficult situations should never be a forgotten or discouraged policy. This should be our biblical stance: Be humble, seek to deepen our understanding of scripture, love people first as children of God, and chiefly rely on the Holy Spirit to aid both ourselves, and the LGBT community.

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