

Sexual Orientation and the Bible – wk. 5

A Sunday School Class for Dayspring Baptist Church

led by Pastor Chris Fillingham; August 27, 2017

The Questions You're Asking

1. What is the history of the institutional Church's interpretation of the 6 Scriptures that have been used to condemn homosexuality? Has their interpretation been consistent?
 - a. Mostly, but not all.
 - b. Genesis 19: Philo, a Jewish 1st century scholar, was the first to suggest that the reason God destroyed Sodom was because of same-sex eroticism. This was picked up in early Christian writings. However, everyone now rejects that interpretation, even Traditionalist scholars.
 - c. Romans 1:26 "women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural" was not interpreted as lesbian behavior for the first three centuries of the church. Church fathers, such as Augustine, understood that to be referring to women engaged in heterosexual eroticism that could not produce pregnancy.
 - d. Modern Debate: Rests firmly on Romans 1 in relationship to Genesis 1-2 and the idea of Gender Complementarity. The other texts are used as supportive texts to emphasize what the bible considers "Normative/Prescriptive." Revisionist Scholars such as David Gushee are not suggesting that these should be read as "Normal/Descriptive" rather than Prescriptive. This is the same change that we have made with texts that seem to support the oppression of women, slaves, and other cultural realities from the world of the bible.

Leviticus and Abomination Questions:

2. "Part of the reason that same-sex eroticism was an 'abomination' was that it was 'wasting' male semen, which was seen as sacred, holding all the power of life. One of the examples you gave was from Gen 38:9-10. *'But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went into his brother's wife so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death.'* Wasn't the sin of Onan not fathering a child to receive his brother's inheritance?"
 - a. Yes! The primary offense has to do with levirate law. But the graphic description of what Onan did was also a reinforcement of Onan's "abomination" of "wasting" his semen. In other words, Onan was doubly a sinner in their eyes! It is both/and.
3. "In Leviticus, was male same-sex eroticism an abomination only because it was a waste of seed? What about the "against our rituals" understanding of *to'vah*/abomination? Did other groups in the Old Testament/Non-Hebrew world practice same-sex behavior?"
 - a. Again, it is a both/and. It is partly a rejection of cultic practices of the neighboring religions. A prohibition of worshipping "Molech" practices of child-sacrifice immediately precedes the prohibition of Leviticus with a male as with a woman (Lev. 18:12-22). There is a similar pattern happening in the structure of Leviticus 20. (James Brownson's book, pg 270 addresses this.)

- b. So there is a strong argument to be made that there are multiple inner-connected reasons that same-sex eroticism was considered an “abomination.” Here’s the logic that may have been at work: *“It wastes sacred semen. Therefore, it’s a cultic worship practice that we will not engage in, even though it’s how neighboring religions practice worshipping their gods.”*

Questions related to Romans: Natural/Unnatural, Shame, Lust

4. Natural/Unnatural Questions:

- a. Concerning the “Personal Disposition Meaning”: “Paul claimed that he doesn’t do what God wants him to do. And he does what he doesn’t want to do. (Romans 7) Doesn’t that undermine the idea that “natural/unnatural” is talking about a personal disposition? Also, what about persons addicted to pedophilia, to child abuse, to pornography? Is this a justification for these as well?”
- i. First it’s important to note that Paul doesn’t use the category “natural/unnatural” in Romans 7. But I see how this is confusing!
 - ii. I’m not suggesting (and neither does Paul) that all our inclinations are good. Or even what comes “naturally” is good. Remember in Ephesians 2:3 Paul uses the category “natural” or “by nature” to say that evil will flow from a person who is “by nature” evil. What we need to recognize is that when Paul specifically uses the greek word for “Natural/Unnatural/Nature/Instinct” (Rom. 1:26-27, Rom. 2:14, Eph. 2:3) he is using a common philosophical category of his day. The category of Natural/Unnatural was developed by Stoic philosophers. Many Jewish writers of Paul’s time began to use it also as a philosophical category. So, for Paul what comes “naturally” to a person is not necessarily “naturally good.”
 - iii. Paul is assuming everyone has a “natural” heterosexual appetite. And they “exchange” it for additional sexual outlets. Again, he doesn’t have a concept of sexual orientation. ***He’s not saying they are exchanging one sexual orientation for another.*** Rather, that they are pursuing sexual outlets other than the “natural” outlets with their wives, the one’s they “naturally desire.” Here’s one way of translating this idea: ***“in the same way also the men abandoned their natural desire for sex with a woman and burned in their desire for other sexual outlets, men with men...”***
 - iv. The point is that in Romans, Paul talks about giving up ***“Natural intercourse for unnatural” these are not synonyms for “straight” and “gay.”***
- b. Biological Meaning: Procreation? “If the only natural reason for sex is procreation, why do women have orgasms, which is unnecessary for procreation?”
- i. Obviously, we (Protestants) don’t still hold these assumptions. Yes, the Catholic church still connects procreation as the primary “natural” reason for sex. However, the Protestant tradition does not teach that procreation is the primary reason for sex. Instead, we emphasize the bonding, or “one-flesh” or “new-kinship-bond” created in sex as it’s primary purpose.

5. “Are male homosexual acts considered ‘shameful’ (Romans 1:27) only for the passive partner, but not the active (penetrating) partner? Or is it ‘shameful’ for both?”
 - a. In the honor/shame culture of Paul’s world, the “shame” is imposed upon the passive partner (boy/student, prostitute, or slave). Shame is a result of a male taking on the “female role.” Remember, there is nothing more “shaming” in a patriarchal culture than for a man to be treated as or “reduced to” the role of a woman.
 - b. That said, the “active partner” was widely condemned by Jewish, Christian, and Pagan writings. They were not condemned because of “shame,” but because of the excessive “glutinous” nature of their sexual exploration. Remember, they are writing about people who are involved in multiple sexual partners in the same time period. Often these were married men.
 - c. ***So while the active/dominate male was not “shamed,” he was widely condemned as having an out of control lust. He was also still committing “shame-ful” acts upon another male.***

Questions about passages we didn’t address:

6. “Whenever the Bible uses marriage imagery for the relationship between Christ and the Church, it always assumes a male/female paradigm. For example, Rev. 21:2 ‘I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.’ Or Eph. 5:25 ‘Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.’ These metaphors for Christ and the church always appear as a ‘husband/wife’ paradigm, modeling the male/female for marriage. How does this fit into this conversation?”
 - a. It is important to remember that there is much of the Bible that is “descriptive” not “prescriptive.” The Bible’s authors are often describing what they see in the world around them. For them, this is what is “normal.” But that doesn’t make it “normative” for all cultures in all times.
 - i. Yes, traditionalists assume these metaphors are “prescriptive/normative” for all people. However, revisionists (such as myself) understand these passages as “descriptive” of what the authors see happening in the world around them.
 - ii. When reading the Bible, it’s generally better to assume that what is being described is “descriptive” and not “prescriptive.” Otherwise we will be back to owning slaves, making sure all women are silent in church, and promoting polygamy.
 - b. It’s also important to recognize that these passages are metaphors, drawing from Paul’s worldview. They are trying to teach us about the mutuality/covenant/commitment relationship between Christ and the church. They are not trying to answer the question of whether or not marriage can be between two people of the same sex. In fact, that is not a question they could even think to ask. It’s simply not the point of the text!
 - i. Side note: If these passages were primarily paradigmatic for marriages, and not the church, it could be understood to support same-sex relationships. The fact that men are in the church and called “the bride” undercuts all traditionalist ideas about gender, identity, and marriage. In other words, using that logic, all men in the church are “brides”!

7. The Gospels and other New Testament writers besides Paul.

a. 3 Similar Questions

- i. "Why doesn't Jesus, John, Peter, or James address the issue? Wasn't it even more common in their time?"
- ii. "Is there any speculation as to why the gospels never mention the issue? You keep mentioning 'culture at the time.'"
- iii. "I've heard it said that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality in the New Testament because 'at the time' there was no question of whether or not it was right or wrong. Thoughts?"

b. My Response: Yes, Jesus never mentions it. Here are a few possible conclusions:

- i. Same sex eroticism was not prominent in the Jewish context that Jesus was teaching the way it was in the Greco-Roman context Paul is addressing. Remember, Paul is the "Apostle to the Gentiles." That fundamentally shapes the dynamics he is trying to address. His writings are letters, letters to real people, in real places, in a particular location. He is addressing those specific contexts. This is another reason we have to be careful about how we apply them universally!
- ii. Likewise, John, Peter, and James were not "Apostles to the Gentiles" like Paul. Paul is uniquely dealing with the Greco-Roman context where this "glutinous sexuality" was common in the culture. The others are addressing more of the Jewish context. Nevertheless, same-sex eroticism undoubtedly took place in hidden corners, just as it always has in the life of the church. It simply wasn't culturally prominent, and so it wasn't really a question.
 1. Remember, same sex orientation is not a paradigm until the 18th century. There is no awareness of it or questions about it in the ancient Jewish world. It was assumed that all people were attracted to the opposite sex. Just like Paul, Jesus doesn't address a reality or question that no one is asking.
- iii. It's also worth noting that even though it likely took place in hidden corners of Jesus' world, Jesus doesn't think this is the important "sin" to be addressing. He would certainly have been aware of it. But he doesn't focus on it the way the church has. Maybe we've been missing the boat!
 1. Who does Jesus criticize consistently? The religious leaders of his community.
 2. What were the sins the Jesus seemed to harp on?
 - a. Judging.
 - b. Creating categories of clean/unclean that **excluded people**.
 - c. Making the external issues central rather than the internal "heart." (Matt 21:31 "*Tax Collectors and Prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you [chief priest, elders, religious authorities].*")
 - d. Not caring for the marginalized "least of these." Matthew 25 list, children, bleeding woman, lepers, etc.

- c. My conclusion about Jesus: *If I'm wrong, I'd rather apologize to Jesus for welcoming too many people, than excluding people because they are "unclean sinners."* I'm placing my bets on Jesus' radical welcome that he demonstrates over and over again.

Questions about Science and Ethics at large:

8. "Have psychiatrists studied the phenomenon of both heterosexual orientation and homosexual orientation? Why/How do these orientations come to be?"
- This is outside my expertise! I'm not the best source of info here. Should we bring in someone to share with us the latest scientific research?
 - From what I've read, there seems to be studies that suggest both "nature" and "nurture" can play a role. I have read about some biological factors that create a tendency toward same-sex ordination.
9. "Aren't immoral acts among heterosexuals condemned as much as between homosexuals?"
- Yes! Here's my conviction: ***It is not the "same-sex" nature of the relationships that the biblical witness is most concerned with. Rather it is the proper place of sexual relationships within covenant-committed relationships.***
 - This is why I've said: "I think what Paul has in mind in Romans, 1 Cor. and 1 Tim. is something everyone would condemn. He doesn't have a paradigm for addressing devoted Christians, worshiping the God made known in Jesus, who have a particular kind of sexual orientation. He is addressing the rampant sexual exploitation and 'any-thing-goes sexuality' common in the Greco-Roman context."
 - This is also why the first Sunday, when I gave my disclaimer: "I have an opinion." I said: "I do think that the Bible speaks negatively about same-sex eroticism... as it sees it expressed. However, I do not think the bible is addressing our question. No, I do not think all same-sex relationships are healthy and holy. But I also do not think all heterosexual relationships are healthy and holy. As I see it, (and yes, I still have questions I'm wrestling with) what makes sexual relationships healthy and holy is that they exist in a life-long, committed-covenant relationship of loving-mutuality that we have traditionally called marriage.
10. "With all the scholarship available to the Catholic Church, why haven't they changed their position on homosexuality?"
- Catholic Discernment: Tradition receives equal weight to scripture.
 - Global Church – this is really a conversation in the western world, where the science has indicated that sexual orientation isn't a choice, but a naturally occurring phenomenon.
 - The largest centers of the global church are in the global south: Latin America and Africa, which are still more conservative over all than the Western/Euro-American Church.
 - Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture – Tradition – Reason—Experience
 - Science and experience are changing how we understand. They have to be in conversation with the scripture and tradition.

- ii. David Gushie gives a few possible paradigms for this interaction in Chapter 15 of *Changing Our Minds*.
11. “I do believe that some humans are born with ‘desires’ for members of the same gender. What does God expect people to do who fall into this category? Live alone? Deny their true feelings? Try to change themselves? And how are we as Christians supposed to treat people who are in same sex relationships? (I have a personal friend who is gay, who used to be a Christian. Because of how some Christians have treated him and because of how he thinks the Bible views him – he has turned away from God.)”
- a. This is the question, isn’t it? **This is why we are having this conversation!** Here’s what we know for sure:
 - i. Anywhere from 2-4% of all people have an un-chosen/innate sexual orientation toward people of the same-sex. They cannot choose otherwise.
 - ii. There are life-long devoted Christians, exhibiting the “fruit of the Spirit” whose sexual orientation or gender identity do not fit traditional categories and who are in same-sex relationships.
 - iii. The church’s options for these individuals have been:
 - 1. Remain celibate.
 - 2. Change through reparative therapy.
 - 3. Choose to be in an opposite-sex relationship anyway.
 - iv. The Fruit of the Church’s teaching has been:
 - 1. Psychological Damage: Reparative therapy does not work and is considered highly damaging. The leaders of this movement apologized and closed it down.
 - 2. Spiritual Damage: It has pushed many people away from Christ.
 - a. They were led to believe that:
 - i. God made a mistake in creating them.
 - ii. They are fundamentally evil, unlike most people.
 - b. Forced celibacy is not God’s intention. It is “not good” according to the Genesis 2 and contradicts Paul’s advice around celibacy and marriage in 1 Corinthians 7.
 - 3. Physical Damage: There is a significant statistical increase in suicide rates and homeless rates of LGBTQ+ teenagers. ***The increase is directly related to the level of rejection they experience by their families***, a rejection that is often religiously motivated.
 - b. What’s the other option? – Change Course. Re-examine in light of the ***essence of the gospel*** and the ***trajectory of the Bible***.
 - i. This parallels the early Church’s deep wrestling and fighting around Gentile inclusion. Gentiles don’t have to be circumcised. In other words, they don’t have to change their “identity” from Gentile to Jew by addressing a concern centered around their genitals. – This is my biblical Narrative Paradigm. The Biblical/Gospel ***trajectory is toward Inclusion***.

1. Galatians 3:27 *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”*
 - ii. This is the same change of course the Church has made around race and slavery. The texts that support slavery in the New Testament are now read as “descriptive, not prescriptive” and seen as contrary to the over all trajectory of the Bible and the gospel.
 - iii. This is the same change of course the Church has made in regards to women. Women are no longer seen as inferior to men (at least in our tradition). The texts that reflect the patriarchal world of the bible are now read as “descriptive, not prescriptive” and seen as contrary to the over all trajectory of the Bible and the gospel.
- c. I’m in the camp that says we need to welcome people of all sexual orientations and gender identities fully into the life of the church, affirming that they too are created in the image of God, and invited into the same kind of loving, committed, covenant relationships as the “sexual majority”.
- i. ***This is not an “anything goes” ethic! I’m advocating for equal sexual ethics and equal expectations for all Christians in their sexual lives.***
 1. Our sexuality is most healthy and fully expressed when in healthy, loving, committed, covenant relationships of mutual love and care. The ideal of marriage.

Question about Dayspring’s Conversation:

12. “Does our church (Dayspring) support LGBTQ+ persons?”
 - a. What does “support” mean? Lots of ways of describing that.
 - i. Can people of all sexual orientations and gender identities join Dayspring?
 1. Yes. The question of membership revolves around whether or not you are committed to following Jesus as best as you know how. Our bylaws only require some form of baptism.
 - ii. Does our church have a statement of support? No. We tend to not make statements or have a “party line” about most questions people are wrestling with. This is what our mission statement suggests in the phrase, “open in heart and mind.”
 - b. I, as a person and pastor, do support the full inclusion of this community. I’ve tried to be clear about my perspective.
 - c. In a Baptist Church, a Pastor doesn’t dictate policy or opinions. Part of the Baptist heritage that I cherish is “freedom of conscious.” I can’t tell you what to think. We’re diverse. Not everyone has the same opinion. ***And I do not think everyone will have the same opinion any time soon!***
 - d. The reason the LT put together a Resource Group is *not* to force everyone to have the same perspective, but to help us talk together about how we will be the church when we know not everyone thinks alike.
 - e. We all want to embody the heart of Jesus!
 - f. How do we practice “welcome?” How do “support” those who think differently or whose lives are hard for us to understand? This is not new. ***We’ve done this in many ways.***