

Essay Series
Homosexuality:
The Case For & Against

Unjustified Exclusion:
A lack of Biblical evidence against homosexuality

David Martin

KEY WORDS

| Molech | Hospitality | Arsenokoitai | Malakoi |
| Homosexuality | Prostitution | Spirit | Law |

ABSTRACT

Homosexuality as understood in the 21st Century (a loving, consensual relationship between two monogamous adults in a committed relationship) has been unjustly persecuted by religious traditionalist. There is a lack of irrefutable Biblical evidence regarding this matter. A closer look at the so-called “clobber verses” reveals, apophatically, no condemnation of same sex sexual behavior within the bible. Context matters when considering the meaning of a passage, as such there can be no plain reading of a text that is 2000-3000 years old, translated from an ancient language into modern contexts. This paper looks at the context, word choices, and the placement of words and phrases as an integral part of a whole. Thus, without any viable basis for condemnation of same sex sexual behavior, the issue for theologians becomes one of response to a behavior we do not understand fully. Grace over condemnation, Spirit over legalism should be the response of people of faith.

INTRODUCTION

The secular world and the religious world seem to be on parallel trajectories. The political divide is ever deepening, ever widening; so too are the theological divides. The rancor of our debates drives wedges deeper and deeper between us, separating that which should not be separated. How prophetic does 2 Timothy 4:3 now appear to us? For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires. Preachers, teachers and Christians in the pews seek out theologies that support their predisposed beliefs and cultural bias. As

evidence there are two great issues before us now that have pulled Christianity apart, from denominations, to associations, and even the local church; abortion and homosexuality. Both of these topics have become a line drawn in the sand between churches from the liberal theology tradition, and churches from conservative or fundamentalist traditions. Why so much agita and angst over this when so many other traditionally held views on sin now go unquestioned? Why is there no outrage against bearing false witness? Why do we tolerate Sabbath breaking, or children (grown or otherwise) being disrespectful to their

parents? Christianity, and the church's response to sin, has changed in response to increased secularism.¹

The rapid social change of the last 100 years has caused people of faith to respond by shifting to millenarianism, particularism, and dualism.² As the world and the church becomes increasingly secularized, the loss of religious authority has allowed space for a more relaxed perspective on things like divorce, greed, bearing false witness, and other clearly sinful actions.³ Even in the very conservative Southern Baptist Convention there has been space opened up for those who divorce. While they strongly oppose divorce, they call on their churches "to proclaim God's mercy and grace to all people—including those who have been divorced without biblical grounds."⁴ They strongly oppose divorce, but still allow membership and the receiving of communion, even to those who remarry. Church history reveals a strong consensus that divorce was sinful, and even in cases of unchasteness it was discouraged, remarriage was out of the question.⁵ Jesus said that one who divorces and remarries commits adultery, it is

an ongoing sin.⁶ From Mark 10:11-12 He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. This applies equally to both men and women, no sexist preferential treatment offered here. The teaching is repeated in Matthew 19:9 as well, and exists within the same context where Jesus talks about three kinds of Eunuchs, which in some interpretations includes the concept of homosexuality (this will be discussed later in the paper).

The argument from the critical traditionalists is that the practice of homosexuality is a sin (one that God will forgive you for), but the behavior must discontinue as it is not sanctioned by divine consent within the traditionally orthodox texts referred to as "The Bible." There seems to be a double standard in their way of thinking (as well as a gaping hole in their exegetical arguments). One cannot argue for a purging of behavior in one group of people, and turn a blind eye to it in another. If one operates under the assumption that homosexual behavior is sinful, then why is it worse than divorce? Jesus never condemns homosexual behavior, but he does condemn divorce and subsequent remarriage. In fact, James 2:10 says that if you are guilty of one point of the law, you are guilty of it in its entirety. If grace (and the graciousness of the church) is offered to the remarried divorcé, then why is this grace and hospitality not offered to homosexuals? My contention is that homosexuality as we understand it was never condemned by scripture. At this point a working

1 James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47.

2 Meredith B McGuire. *Religion: The Social Context*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2002. 39, 215. Rapid social change can in part be identified with the sexual revolution, but in truth it is far more complex. The last 100 years has seen a dramatic shift away from agrarian and rural living. Where multigenerational families were the norm, they have become the exception. Modes of living, transportation, communication and moral values along the spectrum have changed as a result of modernity and scientific advancements. As the world changes in unexpected ways, socially integrated faith communities often formalize a communal response as identified above.

3 Peter L. Berger. *A Rumor of Angels*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1969. Chapter 1.

4 Southern Baptist Convention. 2010. <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1205/on-the-scandal-of-southern-baptist-divorce>

5 David L. Snuth. "Divorce and Remarriage from the Early Church to John Wesley." *Trinity Journal*, 1990: 131.

6 Instone-Brewer, David. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002. 240. It would be tempting to exclude people who have divorced for "Biblical" reasons like being unchaste. However, neither the Biblical text nor the words of Jesus ever makes that particular distinction. Divorce is allowed but remarriage is not permitted. Hence, those who remarry are guilty of adultery so long as they continue in the relationship.

definition is important. In its basest definition, Homosexuality refers to a sexual orientation where the sexual attraction and romantic attraction is oriented towards members of the same sex. The orientation of a person isn't one of personal choice, but a defining characteristic of behavior and personality.⁷ Homosexuals enter into relationships seeking companionship, love, romance and yes, sex. In this they are no different than heterosexuals who enter into relationships for the same reasons. The bias against homosexuality is a result of cultural ideology, and is not supported by good exegesis. Moreover, these biases have been used to unjustly exclude the gay and lesbian community from full inclusion into the life of the church and society. This paper will look to answer the question: Does the Protestant Bible restrict divine-sanctioned human sexual relations to monogamous male-female relationship? I do not believe there is such a restriction. There are six so-called "clobber verses" critical traditionalists have misused and misinterpreted to justify their cultural bias. A closer look at the context of these passages, and the translations will reveal that no sanction against homosexuality (as we understand it today) exists within the texts.

OLD TESTAMENT RESTRICTIONS

The three verses of the Old Testament come from the Books of Law or Pentateuch. The first in Genesis 19 and the other two from the holiness code of Leviticus. It seems most logical to start with Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. First, one must read the text in light of its context, and where it is embedded in the Genesis narrative. In

⁷ American Psychological Association. 2008. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130808032050/http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx>

Genesis 18, we see the exemplar of hospitality in Abraham. As two messengers from God pass by his tent, he offers them shelter, drink and food. Robert Alter plainly points out that chapter 19 elegantly parallels chapter 18. Even synoptically placing Lot sitting at the gate of the city, just as Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent. This parallel is an important road sign directing us to the welcome of strangers. The intent of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative isn't to condemn consensual same sex relationships. It is to condemn the breaking of the hospitality code.⁸ Moreover, one must not forget that rape (homosexual or otherwise) is not about sex, it is sexualized violence. Rape is about the power and control one person exerts over another. In this case, dominating and humiliating strangers who are visiting their city. If the intent of Genesis 19 were to condemn consensual same sex behavior, then that behavior would have been highlighted, not the threat of violent rape.

As Lot attempts to diffuse the situation, he invokes the rights of hospitality, begging the men of Sodom to not harm the two messengers, "for they have come under the shelter of my roof" (19:8). Lot's reproach only angers them more. Lot is then identified as an alien (outsider), and he becomes the focus of their wrath as well, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." (19:9) The men of Sodom were willing to see past Lot's foreignness so long as he played ball as it were, but when he invokes the hospitality rights, he hits to the heart of their true sinfulness.

The true sin of Sodom is told to us by Ezekiel 16:49 This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid

⁸ Robert Alter, trans. *The Hebrew Bible*. Vol. 1. 3 vols. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019. 60

the poor and needy. (NRSV) Brian Peterson argues that there is a sexual component that runs throughout Ezekiel 16. Ezekiel uses graphic sexual images to describe Jerusalem's corruption (and by extension Judah and Israel).⁹ Peterson attempts to argue that the primary focus of Ezekiel's remarks were to reinforce the sexual condemnation of Sodom. The argument is thin at best, and still leaves the exegete with the problem of the actual words Ezekiel wrote. No number of linguistic acrobats can undo or unwrite verse 49. References to their Canaanite heritage, and parental lineage are matters of historical fact, not the prophet casting aspersions on their birth rite. Pride and injustice are at the root of their sin. Ezekiel uses them as a comparison in verse 48 when he writes: your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. This is noteworthy for sure, and placing Jerusalem in the peer category with Sodom serves to highlight just how corrupt Jerusalem had become. But it must be noted that the claims against her are not of a sexual nature.¹⁰

Sodom existed on the plains where the crossroads of trade routes ran. This was likely the source of their wealth and power. Perhaps their arrogance and greed drove them to act out violently against lone travelers. Surely the caravans of silk and spice traders would have entered the city unmolested. But, small groups and single travelers? They would have nothing meaningful to offer, and might need to invoke their right to hospitality.¹¹ A selfish attitude that prevailed within that community might very

well be the motivation behind such repugnant behavior towards guests and travelers. No, one cannot offer a credible argument that homosexuality was the sin that destroyed Sodom. No reasonable reading could lead one to conclude that Sodom was destroyed because of homosexuality, and as such should not be considered as a sanction against consensual same sex relationships.

The two Leviticus passages (18:22, 20:13) reside within the holiness code of the text.¹² Many scholars believe this section of Leviticus was a later "P" source addition that arose in response to behaviors and practices that were adopted during the Babylonian exile.¹³ It is a reasonable conjecture to think that a people taken into captivity for 70 years, and separated from their cultural and religious infrastructure might develop or adopt the practices of their captors. These ideas must be considered when reading the holiness codes for context.

The 18:22 text reads "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman," (NRSV) And, 20:13 "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination." (NRSV). The second passage from chapter 20 is the proscriptive punishment. It lays out who the guilty parties are, and how they should be punished. The actions are narrowly defined; laying with a man as a woman. The first passage is the initial claim that this action is wrong. It is embedded in a section of illicit sexual acts that are also banned. However, within the context of this chapter, the writer makes clear that a contrast is being drawn between the Israelites and the practices of the Egyptians from whence they were coming, and the practices of the

9 Brian Neil Peterson. "Identifying the Sin of Sodom in Ezekiel 16:49-50." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 2 (2018): 309.

10 Paul M. Joyce. *Ezekiel: A Commentary*. New York: T&T Clark International, 2007. 133.

11 Scott Morschauer. "Hospitality, Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background of Genesis 19:1-9." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 2003: 464.

12 Walter C. Kaiser Jr. *The New Intepreters Bible. Vol. 10*. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. 993.

13 Ibid 997.

Canaanites, to where they were heading.¹⁴ This is an important distinction. In verse 5, an addition was placed in the Septuagint that changes the text from "I am the Lord" to "I am the Lord your God." This is a further argument that is helping the reader to draw a distinction between service to YHWH and the worship of foreign Gods, which presupposes that there were many gods.¹⁵

In chapter 18 the long list of prohibited sexual actions are interrupted with the mention of Molech in verse 21. Molech worship persisted in Israel and was practiced alongside YHWH worship for centuries. There are 4 explicit mentions of Molech in the Old Testament (Lev18, 20, Jer 32, 2Kgs 23), and numerous implicit mentions as well.¹⁶ Where YHWH was the living God, and held covenant with Israel, Molech was the god of the dead. Practitioners of the rites were considered necromancers, and the passing of children through fire, and other abhorrent practices were part of the rituals used to speak with the dead. It is no wonder that the worship of this one God, of the many mentioned in Old Testament texts, carries a death sentence. The practice of "passing over" children in the fires of Molech worship may mean child sacrifice, or it could refer to what some scholars believe is the giving of children to be raised as temple prostitutes.¹⁷ Old Testament scholar John Day strongly insists that the sacrifice was an actual child sacrifice.¹⁸ In truth,

14 Leviticus 18: 3 "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes."

15 Ndikho Mtshiselwa. "How the Methodist Church of Southern Africa read Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in view of homosexuality?" *Old Testament Essays*, 2010: 779.

16 Rachel Muers. "Idolatry and Future Generations: The Persistence of Molech." *Modern Theology*, 2003: 556.

17 Ibid., 548.

18 John Day. *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament*. Vol. 41. Cambridge: University of Cambridge

little is known of the details of Molech worship, but its practices were abhorrent enough to warrant a mention of them in the middle of this passage. One must conclude that the writer's intent here is to tie the actions that follow this mention to the various acts of Molech worship. It is reasonable to conclude that some form of temple prostitution, or other sexual acts used as religious rites were being referenced here. German Bibles from the early 1800's translates these passages as "Man shall not lie with young boys as he does with a woman, for it is an abomination."¹⁹ Almost uniformly throughout Europe and The United States, prior to the 20th Century, these passage were understood to be about child molestation. Child sacrifice and temple prostitution were known traits of Molech worship.²⁰ And, chapter 18 seems to be exclusively about immoral sexual relationships, why include anything about Molech if it were not in the context of the Molech rites of worship?

Another point for consideration is Robert Alter's commentary, which rightly points out that the prohibition of anal intercourse between men ("as a woman") is what is specifically condemned in these passages.²¹ There is no mention in chapters 18 and 20 (or in any other texts) that ban other homosexual behaviors. Homosexual sexual acts are not strictly defined by this one act. Only this one act is condemned (and again within the context of Molech worship). And what of Lesbianism? There is no direct Old Testament injunction against same sex relationships between women. So,

Oriental Publications, 1989.

19 Justin Hershey. The Forge. March 21, 2019. <https://www.forgeonline.org/blog/2019/3/8/what-about-romans-124-27>

20 Rachel Muers. "Idolatry and Future Generations: The Persistence of Molech." 547.

21 Robert Alter, trans. *The Hebrew Bible*. Vol. 1. 3 vols. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019. 429.

this begs the question about these two passages, what is it about this one act that makes it an abomination? Why this one act, and none of the other sexual acts that occur within same sex relationships; gay or lesbian? Alter conjectures that it has to do with the “wasting of seed” in a kind of parody of sexual intercourse.²² Consider also that any emission, accidental (nocturnal), or heterosexual emissions, made one ritually impure. Deuteronomy 23:10 “If one of you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp; he must not come within the camp.” The taboos against male emissions were so strong that it carried restrictions for every event. It stands to reason that a “parody” of normalized sexual relations would have seemed outrageous to the Israelites.

None of these Old Testament passages are clear condemnations of same sex sexual relationships as we understand them. Genesis 19 is a study of violence, arrogance, selfishness and inhospitableness. Rape is not sex; it is sexualized violence. Any kind of violence would have been an abomination towards sojourners and immigrants. Deuteronomy 10:19 reads, “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”. Granted this command occurs well after Genesis 19, however one need only look at Abraham’s behavior in chapter 18 when he offered hospitality to the two messengers. Moreover, when Sarah dies, he invokes the right of hospitality while in Hebron saying, “I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” (Genesis 23:4). Any responsible exegesis of the Genesis 19 passage could not conclude that homosexual behavior was being condemned universally. It was a condemnation

22 Ibid.

of violence against strangers.

The same responsible exegesis must be made of Leviticus 18 and 20. Both passages place this behavior squarely within the context of Molech worship. Other behaviors are embedded within the context, but only here in Leviticus 18 and 20 do we find this particular practice mentioned. The other behaviors find mention elsewhere in the texts. This is not to say that there wasn’t a sentiment then that same sex sexual relationships were sinful. It just simply isn’t supported by any clear reading of the text. No such ban exists within the Pentateuch. Numbers has no mention of sexual immorality, and Deuteronomy 23’s sexual immorality laws make no mention of it at all. Only in the Holiness Code, which is arguably a much later addition, makes any reference, and then only in the context of Molech worship.

NEW TESTAMENT RESTRICTIONS

There are no restrictions, apophatically speaking, on same sex sexual behaviors in any of the gospels. In other words, The New Testament passages never address homosexuality as we understand it today. Paul does mention sexual vices in several of his lists (and Paul is quite fond of making lists). These have often been mistranslated and misinterpreted as negative sanctions against consensual homosexual relationships. Paul uses lists of virtues and vices as part of his rhetorical argument, to reinforce particular perspectives. Their purpose is to steer people in a particular direction behaviorally speaking. To Paul these actions or characteristics are inconsistent with people of faith.²³ One’s

23 J. Paul Sampley. *Walking in Love*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016. 84, 123.

witness to the glory of God, to the pureness and goodness of faith in Christ should be reflected in the behaviors of Christianity's adherents. Moreover, Christians must be distinct from the culture they live in on one hand, and be seen as having been transformed.²⁴ The contrast is often with local customs and practices, as well as universal motifs. The letter to Romans differs from the letters to Timothy, for they are addressing different issues with different people. The church of Corinth was different from Ephesus or Rome, and so Paul wrote contextually to them.²⁵ For Paul, it was crucial to think through issues, form arguments, choose words carefully, and create dichotomies in the rhetorical arguments he made.²⁶ In other words, one would not find people who eat meat offered to idols in Jerusalem, so any letter he wrote to a church in Jerusalem would unlikely have any kind of mention of that practice. However, they certainly had thieves, prostitutes and murderers. Understanding Paul means understanding the people he was writing to at the time.

One cannot consider Jude as part of the set of the so-called "clobber verses," as it has already been argued that the mention of Sodom and Gomorrah are not to be considered as consensual sex, but rape. And, the strange flesh, as many scholars agree refers to sex with angelic beings, or even possibly bestiality.²⁷ This leaves only Paul's three often cited references. Two of these mentions (1 Cor 6:9-11, 1 Tim1:9-10)

24 Romans 12:2

25 Davina C. Lopez. "Visual Perspectives: Imagining the Big Pauline Picture." In *Studying Paul's Letters*, by Joseph A. Marchal, 93-116. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 98.

26 Ibid., 100.

27 Kruger, M. A. "ΤΟΥΤΟΙΣΙΝ JUDE:7." *Neotestamentica* 27, no. 1 (1993) 119; Provance, Brett. "Romans 1:26-27 in Its Rhetorical Tradition." In *Greco-Roman and Jewish Tributaries to the New Testament*, edited by Christopher S. Crawford, 83-116. Claremont: Claremont Press, 2018. 100.

are in dispute in how to correctly exegete these passages, because translation issues abound here. The other is Romans 1:26. This passage must be read in its whole context, and when done so reveals a lack of foundational evidence for a claim of restriction on same sex sexual behavior. Jesus does speak of the three kinds of eunuchs, but not in a restrictive or condemning way; this will be explored briefly later in the paper. The apostle Paul is the only one to allude to same sex sexual behaviors. Granted, in Romans it is not mentioned in a favorable light, but it does not carry the weight of restriction. Jude makes reference to Sodom and Gomorra, but the context is different (as mentioned above sex with angelic beings, also rape is not sex). To be fair, Paul condemns all sex outside of marriage. He would prefer that people not have any sex whatsoever, but if they are unable to control their passion, then they should marry so they have a "legal" outlet for their passions.²⁸ Only with Paul's mindset, and the historical context of Greece as a hermeneutic, can we hope to discern what Paul meant.

In both 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10, there is a phrase, or rather word, embedded in Paul's "list" of unacceptable vices. This word in Greek is: arsenokoitai. It is an amalgam of two words; arseno and koitai. Arseno means a man, and koitai roughly means lying in bed. Together the word is likely a vulgar slang for men who are having intercourse. Its position in the list helps determine the context of use.²⁹ The problem with translation here is that the word is a neologism. Paul invents the word, quite possibly by referring to the

28 1 Corinthians 7:9 "But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion."

29 Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014. 244.

Septuagint reference of Leviticus 18 and 20.³⁰ Moreover, this word is hapax legomena. It is used for the first time by Paul, only once in the entire text, and is repeated only once subsequently by a deuterio-Pauline writer. Authorship of 1 Timothy is in question, and though it is ascribed to Paul, it is likely a writer using Pauline sources in a new epistle.³¹ Which in essence supports the claim of hapax legomenon, as the source material is likely 1 Corinthians 6. Though it is “recycled” material, the usage of the word has a slightly different context in 1 Timothy than 1 Corinthians, so they need to be addressed individually.

The list of vices in 1 Corinthians is for a specific intended audience; gentile Christians living in Corinth. As part of his rhetorical style, Paul tailored his vice lists for his intended audience, the context of which guides the understanding of the passage. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul is addressing the practice of members of the Corinthian church taking each other to civil court. It is the rich who invariably are the initiators of civil court cases.³² Keep in mind that most churches were populated by the very poor (largely slaves and laborers); wealthy or powerful were less common. Pauls’ rhetoric throughout 1 Corinthians juxtaposes the rich and powerful with the poor and oppressed of the church. It is unfathomable to Paul that a rich church member (one who was “washed” or baptized vs.11) should shame another church member by dragging them through a worldly court.³³ This is the context that Paul is setting

30 Wayne C. Mayhall. *Christian Research Institute*. June 11, 2009. <https://www.equinox.org/article/is-arsenokoitai-really-that-mysterious/> (accessed December 12, 2019).

31 Porter, Stanley E. “Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 1995: 107.

32 N.T. Wright. *The New Interpreters Bible*. Vol. 10. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. 853.

33 Ibid., 856.

up in this pericope. The wealthy abuse the poor, using their money and social privilege to oppress those who cannot mount a credible defense.

There were several abhorrent practices occurring within Greek cities in this era. One of them was the practice of buying young boys to be used as sexual slaves.³⁴ A reasonable interpretation of Paul’s list of vices would be that arsenokoitai was such a practice.³⁵ Arsenokoitai follows malakoi in the vice list. Malakoi in the Greek lexicon can refer to moral weakness, softness, or even calmness of the sea.³⁶ Since it is included in a vice list, we can eliminate the calm sea. Its pairing next to arsenokoitai is probably not coincidental. The arsenokoitai would be one who practices pederasty, or who buys young boys for sexual slavery. The malakoi, as some scholars point out, would be a young man or boy who sells himself as a prostitute. Malakoi was also a derogatory sobriquet for men who were seen as weak or soft, conflating them to the passive partners in homosexual prostitution.. In this case, the pairing of words likely means that malakoi was the passive sexual partner to the arsenokoitai.³⁷

It does not appear that Paul is condemning consensual same sex relationships in this (1 Cor 6) context. He is very much condemning the sexual practice of pederasty. Rich men buy

34 Jennifer A. Glancy. *Slavery in Early Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 65.

35 Robin Scroggs. *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983. Scroggs argues that arsenokoitai and malakoi refer to the two participants in pederasty, hence Paul does not use the word pederasty, but indicts the participants in pederasty or by extension prostitution. The vice list identifies people committing vices, not the vice itself. By example the 6th Commandment says we should not murder, but implies we should not be murders. Conversely, Paul condemns prostitutes, but implies we should not engage in prostitution.

36 Liddel and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 424.

37 Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 243.

young male slaves, and violate their person. This practice is one humanity finds universally vulgar and abhorrent. Prostitution, no matter the willingness of the prostitute is not a consensual relationship. Paul condemns the act of prostitution because the two bodies become one flesh (1Cor 6:16). This is an incompatible pairing for one who is in union with Christ. It defiles the sacred relationship. Paul isn't condemning sex, he is condemning the act of prostitution.³⁸ There is a power disparity involved where one person becomes the object of another's lustful desires. The prostitute is the object, the thing if you will, that satisfies desire. The act of prostitution is dehumanizing, and is contemptuous of the inherent spiritual worth of another human being. Paul is right to condemn the practice, but one should not interpret this to mean that he condemns consensual same sex behavior between two loving, monogamous consenting adults in a committed relationship. Apophatically speaking, the text simply doesn't say this. 1 Corinthians 6 neither condemns nor condones consensual monogamous same sex relationships. Citing a poor (and biased) translation as a "proof" that homosexuality is negatively sanctioned is no proof at all.

The passage from 1 Timothy 1 has similar issues. The same word, arsenokoitai, is employed in verse 10, as was used in 1 Corinthians 6. Yet, here we find an even stronger case for the usage to refer to the practice of pederasty. Like Corinthians, the word is nestled between two words that contextualize the meaning. It is preceded by fornicator (whoremonger in KJV) and followed by slave trader. Fornicator, pornos in the Greek, is a poor translation. A more literal translation would be male prostitute.³⁹ The

word appears 10 times in the New Testament (including 1 Corinthians 6) and is consistently translated to identify an immoral person, or fornicator. In Martin Luther's translation pornos is translated as whore, and arsenokoitai is boy molester. Subsequent German translations (as well as numerous European translations) render these words as whore (or prostitute) and boy molester.⁴⁰ The Catholic Bible translates it as "sodomite" but offers in the commentary that it "refers to adult males who indulged in homosexual practices with such boys."⁴¹ Clearly this is an issue with translation and interpretation. Since arsenokoitai is hapax legomena, and only Paul truly understood what he meant, there is no "correct" translation for this word. That leaves in interpretation. To interpret a word, one must consider the context of the culture at the time of the writing, the audience, and the writer. Also, of crucial importance is the sum of the source material, the rhetorical style, and how words are used and placed within a text. Paul wrote to Greeks about Greek culture using Greek rhetorical methods. His vice lists were intimately related in structure, and were meant for the reader to draw a conclusion from them.⁴² Sexual immorality is bad. Greek sexual immorality was abhorrent in that they used sexual slaves; that's what one can draw from these passages. Any action that dehumanizes people is detestable, this is the same conclusion Paul makes in Romans chapter 1.

In the letter to the Romans Paul argues that "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through

38 Jennifer A. Glancy. *Slavery in Early Christianity*. 66.

39 Maria Nowak. "Defining prostitution in Athenian legal rhetorics." *The Legal History Review*, 2010: 183.

40 Justin Hershey. The Forge. March 21, 2019. <https://www.forgeonline.org/blog/2019/3/8/what-about-romans-124-27> (accessed November 12, 2019).

41 *Unites States Council of Catholic Bishops*. n.d. <http://www.usccb.org/bible/1cor/6:9#54006009>

42 J. Paul Sampley. *Walking in Love*. 135.

the things he has made.” (1:20) In other words, nature itself is revelatory to the will and design of God. Those who act outside of nature have either been dehumanized by another, or are dehumanizing themselves. This has been Robert Gagnon’s main argument; that the “fittedness” of sex organs (male to female) is divine revelation enough. Homosexual sex is wrong because it is contrary to the natural order of creation. The parts aren’t being used according to the design of creation.⁴³ Gagnon feels no need to offer proof of this point of view, he merely supports his argument through a misguided perception of nature.⁴⁴ In essence he works in reverse. He has come to a conclusion, then works (and manipulates) natural and divine revelation “evidence” to fit his point of view.

The question should be “what was Paul’s view?” Or rather, what is it that Paul is saying here? Paul too believes in natural revelation, and he sees same sex sexual behavior as unnatural. Yet Paul’s sample size of nature is fairly narrow; mostly limited to animal husbandry, and domesticated animals. There is a mountain of research evidence that is contradictory of Paul’s natural revelation. Same sex sexual behavior is quite common in the animal world.⁴⁵ And, as animals do not have the ability to sin, the behavior cannot be negatively sanctioned nor considered to be unnatural. One might argue that there are always defects in nature, and if a large enough study is done, some

odd behavior will present itself. The problem with this argument is that in mammals same sex sexual behavior occurs in 8 to 10% of the total population, and for some species of bird (mallards) it can be as high as 19%.⁴⁶ If Paul is making the argument of natural revelation in Romans 1, then he is unwittingly making an argument **for** same sex sexual behavior, as it is a common occurrence in nature.

To understand what Paul meant, the entire pericope must be placed in context. Paul is addressing idol worship, and God’s wrath towards those who suppress the truth. Some theologians have argued (again) that Romans 1:26-27 is about temple prostitution, though that is a far stretch. Clearly Paul is focused on the actions of people who are worshipping other gods. N.T. Wright argues that the key to this passage is the consequences of idol worship, and he ties that argument to the three times (vs. 24, 26, 28) in which “God gives them up.”⁴⁷ In verse 23 Paul writes “and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.” Paul isn’t talking about any specific religion; he is encompassing all religions outside of the Judeo-Christian umbrella. This lack of specificity makes it hard to claim that in this instance (unlike Leviticus) that same sex behavior is in relation to temple prostitution. God’s response to this “exchanging the glory” is to give these people up to the degrading of their persons. God allows them to be dehumanized. God gives these people up to degrading sexual behavior (same sex sexual behaviors) and describes it as receiving “in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (1:27)” In this context, homosexual behaviors are a punishment from God. They receive this

43 Robert A.J. Gagnon. *The Bible and Homosexual Practices: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001. 364.

44 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2009. 72.

45 Bagemihl, Bruce. *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999. 164. It should be noted that “homosexuality” is a term referring to the genus “homo”, or man. Within the animal kingdom it is more appropriate to use “same sex sexual behavior” rather than homosexual to avoid confusion.

46 Ibid., 493.

47 N.T. Wright. *The New Interpreters Bible*. Vol. 10. 431.

penalty as a result of their idol worship; which Paul understands as a willful attempt to deny an awareness of God. The issue here with this piece of Paul's argument is one of actual awareness. Paul assumes through his natural revelation argument, that YHWH the God of Israel, has revealed Godself to all other cultures. This also necessarily implies that all other cultures would then have a rudimentary understanding of the moral code within which YHWH operates. Otherwise, how could they deny YHWH's existence, and the natural moral order? It is a premise as faulty as the argument of natural revelation itself.

The Romans 1 passage is so problematic in its logic, and assumptions that one cannot readily condemn homosexuality as we understand it today; as between two loving, consenting adults. Arguments like this, gleaned from Paul's rhetoric, are the fuel which deeply dehumanizes people, in a similar fashion as slavery or prostitution. It argues that the entire being of a person is defined by the 45 minutes a week they might engage in sexual activity, reducing their humanity to acts, and dismissing the whole of the being. Paul does not take into account the other 167 hours 15 minutes of the week. Homosexuals get reduced to caricatures, ones that do not exist outside the bedroom except in wildly offensive stereotypes. Idol worship does this to people? Or do Christians do this to people?

What of those who are homosexual that never engaged in idol worship? Does God give them up to same sex sexual behavior? This is another logical flaw in Paul's rhetoric. He is operating from too small a sample size to make sweeping claims about divine revelations through nature. Moreover, he is claiming that homosexuality is a punishment. The text does not say that homosexuality is negatively

sanctioned, it merely reveals Paul's insufficient argument. Clearly Romans 1 was not written as a sanction, but in context defines particular behaviors as a just punishment for a different offense. This is in effect divine retributive justice, a doctrine of ancient Israel that the sins of the parent were meted out on the children.⁴⁸ Jesus disputes this point of view when he is asked in John 9:2 "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Christ responds that his blindness is merely an opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed. In Luke 5 a paralytic is lowered through the roof for Jesus to heal. His first response is to say "Friend, your sins are forgiven." (5:20) To which the pharisees respond with outrage. Jesus reminds them it is easier to forgive someone's sins than to heal them (5:23). If, in a Christian's discernment, they understand homosexuality to be a sin, isn't it easier to forgive that sin, than to try to change their base nature?

None of the New Testament texts can be used to condemn homosexuality as we understand it today. Same sex sexual behavior in the Biblical texts are contextualized as oppressive and dehumanizing behaviors. Rape is not the same as sex, and prostitution and pederasty never quite meet the standard of consensual. Yet for those who have been victims of this kind of inculcation, an apophatic exposition of Biblical passages will not serve as proof enough. How then should Christians respond to homosexuality if we cannot decipher a clear and unified voice on this matter?

GRACE RESPONDS TO SIN

As this paper is primarily a "debate" piece, some liberties must be taken for the sake of rhetoric. With this in mind, any argument

⁴⁸ Exodus 34:7, Numbers 14:18, Jeremiah 32:18

that seeks to decipher whether homosexuality is sinful or not, must first and foremost be addressed through the lens of grace, God's response to sin. Necessarily included should be some reasonable working definition of sin. John Wesley's mother (Susanna) wrote to him while at Oxford, including this description of sin: "Whatever weakens your reason, Whatever increases the authority of your body over your mind, Whatever impairs the tenderness of your conscience, Whatever takes away your relish for things spiritual, Whatever obscures your sense of God, That is sin to you, no matter how innocent it may seem in itself."⁴⁹ While this does not name what a sin is, it accurately describes the spiritual effects of sin on the person, and the relationship between God and humanity. Robert Gagnon would like us to believe that homosexuality is a form of idol worship. And, by the definition of Susanna Wesley that sort of idol worship would find itself well within her definition of sin. However, as Jack Rogers points out, this definition only works if one begins first with the assumption that homosexuality is a sin.⁵⁰ It is a kind of logical fallacy when one confuses cause and effect, or "getting the cart before the horse." So, for arguments sake, sin isn't what we decide it is (or isn't) it is an impairment of our sense of God (as Susanna Wesley writes). Grace is how that impairment is healed. In that regard, how does a Christian reconcile their faith when confronted with the idea of sin; in self and in others?

In Wesleyan terms, God's grace is prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. In all ways, God touches human life and reconciles the fractured relationship through grace. The United Methodist church describes grace as, "the love

and mercy given to us by God because God desires us to have it, not necessarily because of anything we have done to earn it". It is not a created substance of any kind.⁵¹ The overriding argument of grace is that we need do nothing to have it. It is the essential teaching of Christianity that salvation is faith based, not works based. How can Christians of good conscience declare that grace exists for those who are divorced and remarried, but not for those who are gay? It would seem that the doctrines of some churches are confused. Divorced (and remarried) people need only rely on the grace of Christ, while homosexuals must first change completely before they can be accepted in the church and receive the ordinances (or sacraments) of the church. Paul writes in Ephesians 2: 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. So that no one may boast, also so that no one may judge another's sins. The implication is clear that the healing and regeneration of the soul is the work of God, and is offered through faith, not through works. There is no Biblical justification to place further burdens than faith upon a person.

In Romans 4 Paul writes 15" For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation." This is a critical notion when trying to understand the fullness of God's grace. There is a fracture in the relationship between God and humanity, expressed in the simpler terms of sin. All human beings have sin, and it is a matter of confessing our sins to find forgiveness.⁵² Moreover, Romans 10:9-10 offers the very simple formula for salvation which is

49 Susanna Wesley. *Susanna Wesley: The Complete writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 109.

50 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. 83.

51 The United Methodist Church. March 12, 2018. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-wesleyan-concept-of-grace>

52 1 John 1:8-10. All of us have sin. Whether you believe homosexuality is a sin or not, everyone relies on grace to relieve them of the burden of sin.

undeniable: because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. There are no restrictions on this which prohibits salvation because of sin.

Paul's core argument over and over again is that there is no life in law, only condemnation. The flesh we inhabit is part of the ordered and natural world, bestowed upon us in the beginning. It is problematic, because this weakness of flesh invariably draws human beings into sin, and thus into a fractured relationship with the creator.⁵³ In Christ we find new life; the old self is part of the old creation, whereas in Christ our spirits are regenerated. We are able to see the truth of our broken and sinful nature through prevenient (or enabling) grace. It precedes human action, and is the work that God has done in us that, though not guaranteeing salvation, allows us to see the truth of Christ's salvific work. So, the law reveals sin, prevenient grace helps us to see the truth of that sin. In this sense, as we understand Paul, our sin becomes revealed to us through the spirit. It is no longer a matter of interpreting the law, but living under Spirit, guided by grace. The revelation of sin and the need to repent is a matter between God and the individual. In the same way that we have faith and trust in grace for our salvation, we must trust in the grace that is at work in the life of every other person who embraces faith in Christ.

When we enter into relationship with Christ, we do so because of (and through) justifying grace; the cross and the resurrection. It was the work that Jesus, in obedience to God, did for us. John 3: 16 "For God so loved the world that he

gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The implication here is that God through Christ has paid the price, and that condemnation is not God's wish, salvation and the divide between God and humanity bridged is the endgame. There are no supporting Biblical verses that teach that one must be perfect in thought word and deed to have salvation, only that one must have faith in Christ.

Paul writes in Romans 8 that for those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation. This is not a point that can be sidestepped. Paul, just a few verses earlier (Chapter 7), agonizes over his own ability to refrain from sin (Romans 7:14-24). It is indeed Christ Jesus who rescues us from the body of death! The often-heard counter to this is the rhetorical question: Should we therefore continue in sin (Romans 6:1)? The answer to his question has more to do with attitude and location than actual actions. J. Paul Sampley argues that Paul sees sin as less about singular actions, and more about a controlling power.⁵⁴ Is a Christian ruled by the powers of death, destruction and the evil of sin, or are they ruled by Spirit? Those who follow Christ have died to sin, how can they abide it any longer? The answer is found in vs. 12-14 of that chapter. The reign of sin over humanity (sin only exists within the context of the law) has been broken. Our abode as Christians has changed from the address of sin, to the new location of life under Spirit.⁵⁵ Paul asks again in vs. 15: What then, should we sin because we are not under law, but under grace? By no means!" In this case Paul is referring to actual behavior. If one can refrain

53 N.T. Wright. *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. 37.

54 J. Paul Sampley. *Walking in Love*. 52.

55 N.T. Wright. *The New Interpreters Bible*. Vol. 10. 542.

from sin, one should do so. Or, just because you can sin (because of grace), doesn't mean you should. However, this falls quite short of condemning anyone for having sin. All have sin (1 John 1:8), so why do Christians feel it is so important to punish the sins of others? The crucial conclusion to this line of reasoning are found in the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 7:1 "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2 For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

Forgiveness is inseparable from the Good News of the Kingdom. Jesus encourages us to forgive without limits. We are to forgive seventy times seven. This is clearly not a literal limitation on how to forgive, it is steeped in numerology. Seven times ten is the perfect number of God multiplied by the number of completeness, again multiplied by the number of God. God is pure and infinite, the subtext is that forgiveness knows no boundaries, has no limitations. However, critics counter that forgiveness is contingent upon contrition.⁵⁶ If Christ wants us to forgive each other in such a way, is it not reasonable to expect that he forgives without hesitation or limitation? Critics of this line of reasoning might worry that this attitude cheapens grace.⁵⁷ Is that the worry of conservative and fundamentalist Christians; that not condemning homosexuality cheapens their own salvation? If this is the stumbling block, then the fault lays with them, not with the homosexual.

56 Timothy P. Jackson. *The Priority of Love*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 137.

57 Timothy P. Jackson. *The Priority of Love*. 138.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

There are no "clear" passages that condemn homosexuality or same sex sexual behaviors as we understand them today. The Old Testament has only Leviticus and Genesis to turn to, and the contextual understanding of those passages renders a condemnation impossible. Jesus never condemns same sex sexual behaviors. He does spend a great deal of time on injustice, poverty, oppression and judgementalism. There are over 3000 verses in the Bible that testify to God's concern for the poor, and just a scant few that are being (improperly) used to condemn same sex sexual behavior.⁵⁸ The closest Jesus ever comes after an answer regarding Divorce in Matthew 11: For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." Those who are incapable of marriage would be eunuchs from birth, who have no sexual desire for the opposite sex. There are scholars that argue that Jesus meant person of same sex sexual attraction.⁵⁹ Jesus does not condemn them, but exhorts anyone who can to accept this idea.⁶⁰

It is difficult for people to accept something they have been told was wrong their whole lives. They see the world in a particular way, and they rely on their "feelings" about homosexuality. These feelings reinforce their support for the natural law arguments, which fall short because they draw a conclusion based on limited data. Moreover, they cherry pick passages to fit

58 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. 89.

59 Randolph W. Baxter. "The Illumination of Context: The Bible and Homosexuality. pdf file." September 2014. <http://disciplesallianceq.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Bible-and-Homosexuality-English-2017.pdf>

60 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. 89.

the preconceived prejudice based on errant conclusions. It is intellectually dishonest. Using scripture as proof texts to support a predisposed belief, regardless of what the text does or does not say, is irresponsible. It relies on plain readings of passages that cannot and should not be read plainly.

The hard truth for both sides in this theological debate is that the Bible neither condemns nor affirms same sex sexual behavior. But what the Bible does do, is point us in the direction of an all-consuming grace and the perfect love of God. This love calls us to love our neighbors, be generous with ourselves, and be generous (and patient) with forgiveness; to do anything else is unjustified.

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David Martin

David Martin is a pastor in the United Methodist denomination since 2008, serving two churches in Connecticut. He graduated from Boston University with a Master of Divinity degree on the pastoral ministry track. Pastor Martin was one of the distinguished preachers invited to compete for the Garner Award for Preaching in 2016. He is currently a candidate for a Doctor of Ministry degree at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School with an emphasis on transformative leadership. David was born and raised in Springfield Massachusetts and is married to Stacey, and together they have five grown children, and are currently raising their Dalmador grand-dog Gidgette.

