

GREAT THAT'S A ~~TOUGH~~ QUESTION

4. Is Christianity Homophobic?

October 4, 2020

What we hope to do today is find a way through a series of contentious, divisive, pain-filled questions—a way that is both faithful to scripture and compassionate in addressing members of the LGBTQ community who have been deeply wounded and alienated by the church. How do we communicate in a way that is respectful and gentle while still committed to the truth? How do we live out 1 Peter 3:15:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

Welcoming or Affirming?

Broadly speaking, the church is wrestling with two positions. Both are held by committed followers of Jesus. Both are wrestling seriously with scripture.

- **Welcoming but not affirming.** That is to say, the church should be a place of welcome for all people, recognizing that we all come with sin and brokenness in our lives. However, God’s plan or design for human life is that sex be expressed or experienced within the context of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Homosexuality was not God’s original creative intent for humanity.
- **Welcoming and affirming.** The church should be welcoming of all people and should affirm those with a same-sex orientation, including those who are involved in committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. Covenantal relationships between members of the same sex are a reflection of God’s love, and an expression of a God-given same-sex orientation. The bible passages that mention homosexuality do not envision such relationships, but refer to acts of abuse, violence, prostitution and/or promiscuity.
- Regardless of where you land, we should be committed to both *grace* and *truth*. Even if you conclude that all homosexual behavior is wrong, as many conservative Christians do, we’re still compelled to respond with love.
- It takes no grace to show love to someone who is just like me; it takes a lot of grace to show love toward someone of whom I disapprove. As has often been observed:
“Christians get very angry toward other Christians who sin differently than they do.”
- Jesus had much to say about greed, hypocrisy, pride and lust—sins many of us struggle with—but did not mention homosexuality, at least not directly.

Jesus is far more interested in people’s spiritual orientation than their sexual orientation.

Four Definitions

Christian missiology says that if we want to engage culture well with the gospel, we need to understand the language. These four terms are really important because they help us better understand the many layers involved in this discussion.

- 1. Sexual Orientation.** Sexual orientation refers to the strength and persistence of one's romantic and sexual attraction to someone or something else.
 - Orientation is something that's within oneself. Most people who have an orientation don't really know how they got it. It is far too simplistic to say it is a choice. For the most part, sexual orientation does not change.
 - Remember that all of us are disoriented in some way. And all of our sexualities are disoriented in some way, shape or form. There's a level of brokenness to all of us.
- 2. Sexual Behaviour.** Sexual behavior is the sexual activity one chooses to engage in. This is exclusively chosen.
- 3. Sexual Identity.** This is the act of labeling oneself based on one's sexual attractions or orientation. "Because, I am attracted to someone of the same sex, therefore I am gay."
 - Sexual identity can mean something very different to different people. As with straight Christians, the romantic-sexual lives and identities of LGBTQ Christians vary.
 - As followers of Christ, we believe that our experiences don't define who we are, but rather, our identity in Christ helps us interpret the experiences we've had and can redeem all our experiences for the sake of his glory.
- 4. Gender Identity.** Gender identity is the act of identifying oneself as male or female. This is different from sexual identity, which is based on attraction and/or orientation.
 - Gender dysphoria takes place when a young person's biological sex isn't in line with their emotional disposition, or how they see themselves as male or female. In today's culture, between the binary of male and female there are all sorts of other options.

What Does the Bible Say About Same Sex Relationships?

There are six passages in the Bible that speak directly to the subject of homosexuality:

1. Genesis 19 (Judges 19) – The Sin of Sodom

- Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are brutal descriptions of sexual violence involving a mob of men trying to rape male guests who were living under the protection of local households. Both involve the offer of women as an alternative. In Genesis 19, the women (daughters) are refused, preferring to rape the men. In Judges 19, the woman (a concubine) is accepted, tortured and raped to death, and then dismembered later by her own master.

- Very few biblical interpreters—traditional or not—think these two “texts of terror” are primarily about homosexuality. The more relevant comparison is to wartime or prison rape. As such, they are no longer cited as often in the argument against homosexuality.

2. Leviticus 18:22/20:13 – An Abomination?

Leviticus 18:22 commands men not to lie with men as with women. Leviticus 20 prescribes the death penalty for this offense.

“Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination.” (Leviticus 18:22)

“If a man lies with a man as one lies with woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads” (Leviticus 20:13).

- For those who hold to a *welcoming but not affirming* position, these two texts are important as they are the only direct references to homosexual behaviour in the Old Testament.
- Variations of the Hebrew word *toevah* (usually translated either as an adjective “detestable,” or as a noun “abomination”) appear 117 times in the Old Testament.
 - Deuteronomy names the eating of pork, rabbit, and shellfish as an abomination.
 - Ezekiel 18:10-13 names violence, adultery, oppression of the poor, robbery, and charging interest on loans as abominations worthy of death.
 - Ezekiel 22:6-12 adds contemptuous treatment of parents, mistreatment of refugees, orphans and widows, profaning the sabbath, slander and bribery as abominations.
- The point that *welcoming and affirming* Christians want to make is this: 111 of the 117 uses of the term “abomination” describe other activities. Few, if any, of those activities are described as abominations by Christians today or met with such open hostility.

3. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10/1 Timothy 1:10 – Two Odd Words

- In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, the Apostle Paul offers a list of vices as part of his moral teaching on the Christian life. This is a common and effective strategy in the New Testament—listing out virtues to cultivate and vices to avoid.
- The two odd little Greek words that appear in these lists are *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

“Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men (malakoi) who have sex with men (arsenokoitai) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

“The law is for people who are sexually immoral, or who practice homosexuality (arsenekoitai), or are slave traders, liars, promise breakers, or who do anything else that contradicts the wholesome teaching.” (1 Timothy 1:10)

- *Malakoi* literally means “soft.” It is translated widely in English as “weakling”, or “wanton”, or “debauchers”, or “effeminate” or male “prostitutes”. When coupled with the word *arsenekoitai* in 1 Corinthians 9 we get the awkward English translation “men who have sex with men” or literally “homosexuals who have sex with male prostitutes.”
- In the most exhaustive and most frequently cited study of human sexuality in the Bible, William Loader says that the terms have much broader, darker meanings—a reference to the ancient practice of *pederasty* (the pimping out of young boys to older men).

4. Romans 1:26-27 – A Bitter Exchange

- Romans 1:26-27 is the most widely cited passage in the LGBTQ debate, and rightly so. Paul is making an argument about why everyone needs salvation. Paul lists a number of practices, including same-sex acts on the part of both men and women.

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

- Because Romans 1 points to the same-sex behaviour of both men and women it is hard to dismiss it as the abusive practice of pederasty. We don’t know of any exploitive relationships involving older women and young girls in the Roman world.

A New Biblical Foundation

Instead of concentrating on the prohibitive texts, we should consider the high and glorious Scriptural vision of sexuality. Genesis 1-2 speaks to the binary nature of gender and sex within the context of a monogamous heterosexual marriage.

- In Genesis 1, you see pairs of different, but complementary, things made to work together: heaven and earth, sea and land, even God and humanity. It is part of the brilliance of God’s creation that diverse, unlike things are united and those unions create more and more life and beauty through their relationships. The creation and uniting of male and female at the end of Genesis 2 is the climax of all this.
- Even Jesus draws us back to the creation design:

“Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his

wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate." (Matthew 19:4-6)

A Faithful Response

There are three types of responses that I think we need to wrestle with:

- **An ethical or theological response.** What do we believe to be right and wrong?
- **A civic response.** What do we believe about the rights and dignity of other human beings? How do we relate to our governments and our society?
- **A pastoral response.** How do we now care for the people within our families, our churches and our communities? Here are five suggestions:

1. Remember, we don't want to just speak the truth. We want people to hear the truth, which means we need to be really aware of how we're communicating the truth, especially around issues that we see as sin and our culture does not.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him with a spirit of gentleness. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1-2)

2. Help people interpret God's design in a way that could actually be redemptive, not just condemning. We have to do a better job of explaining the scriptural narrative of creation, fall, redemption, restoration.
3. Quit making an idol out of sex and marriage. In order to combat the sexual depravity in our culture we have raised it up to the same level as they have. We have hyper-sexualized the church. We have made this the defining issue of the Christian life and the true test of Christian orthodoxy.
4. We need to fully embrace an identity in Christ. That means my primary identity is "in Christ" and that identity helps me understand and interpret all my other experiences. Cultural script says if you have same-sex attraction, you're gay—that's your primary identity. We say no, who we are is in Christ.
5. We need to be communities defined by grace. And, and we need to tip toe on that Razor's edge a little bit: where sometimes we'll fall on the side of grace and sometimes, we'll fall on the side of law. If we're going to err, let's err on the side of grace.

But it will be grace and truth, with the conviction that God's way is not just right, it's good. It's really good. And it's good for all people.