

# THE BIBLE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

## INTRODUCTION: THE BIBLE SAYS ...?

In February 2016, Filipino boxing star, elected politician, and evangelical Christian, Manny Pacquiao remarked in a television interview that people who enter in same-sex civil marriage are “worse than animals.” He was criticized, and lost a lucrative Nike endorsement deal. A couple of days later, Manny put up an Instagram post citing several Bible verses, including Leviticus 20:13. The post was taken down after two hours, but not before a media firestorm. Several news outlets reported the story as “Manny quotes Bible: Gays should be put to death.” Lev 20:13 says:

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. (ESV)

While some view this story as an instance of media sensationalism, I think we should also see it as an example of how Bible verses have been used with the effect of pushing people away from Christ and his church. Often, the use of verses like this one have caused gay people to feel threatened, hurt, excluded, and fearful.

So, what does the Bible say about homosexual behaviour? The example above illustrates how the conclusions we reach, and the posture we take, affect the lives of people made in the image of God.

## THE PASSAGES AND THE CORE QUESTION

Six passages in the Bible have been identified to mention homosexual activity – or to be more specific, same-sex intercourse. They have been traditionally understood to say that homosexual activity is wrong:

Gen 19:1–9;  
Lev 18:22;  
Lev 20:13;  
Rom 1:26–27;  
1 Cor 6:9;  
1 Tim 1:10.

But there is a now an ongoing debate about whether these passages apply to monogamous, consensual, loving gay relations.

As NT scholar Preston Sprinkle has said, that is the core question that needs to be explored: whether two persons of the same sex can date, fall in love, and commit to a life-long, consensual, self-giving, monogamous union.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.advocate.com/sports/2016/2/18/manny-pacquiao-quotes-leviticus-gays-should-be-put-death>; accessed on 1 Mar 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 17.

Does the Bible really address and prohibit this type of relation? Opposing answers have been given to this question, with proponents on both sides accusing the other of doing violence to the texts. In fact, the majority of bible or theology scholars who have written books about homosexuality in the last forty years have concluded that the Bible does not condemn consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, we will examine some of these interpretations of the six passages, with the core question in mind.

Throughout, I'm going to use the word "nonaffirming" to describe those who think God does not affirm consensual, monogamous, same-sex sexual relations. And I use the word "affirming" to describe those who believe that consensual, monogamous, same-sex sexual relations can be affirmed by God.<sup>4</sup>

### GENESIS 19:1-9

Two men visit Lot in Sodom. The men of Sodom demand to have sex with the visitors. To cut a sordid story short, the city is judged and destroyed. Does this infamous story in Gen 19 condemn loving, consensual, monogamous gay relations?

Affirming scholars have long argued "No." The men of Sodom were not asking to go on a double-date with the visitors, or buy them chocolates, or take them out to dinner and movies. They were trying to gang-rape the two visitors. Such an atrocity would have incurred judgment even if Lot's guests were women. The story is not relevant to loving, consensual, monogamous gay relations.

I think affirming scholars have a good argument. Sodom's main sin (out of many) is a particularly horrific form of inhospitality – instead of aiding or helping visitors like Abraham did in the previous chapter, like Lot did in the present chapter, the men of Sodom wanted to rape them.

This is why, when Sodom is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, it is associated with pride, arrogance, injustice, oppression, hoarding wealth, being uncaring for the poor (see esp. Ezek 16.49-50, but also Isaiah 1:10-17, 3:9 Jeremiah 23:14; Lamentations 4:6; Matthew 10:5-15). There is little in the rest of the Bible that links Sodom explicitly or exclusively to homosexual sex.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples: John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Robin Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Millenium ed. New Mexico: Alamo Square Press, 2000); Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006); Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate* (Jericho Books, 2012); James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmans, 2013); Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Reprint ed. Colorado Springs: Convergent Books, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The nonaffirming and affirming views are sometimes called the "traditional" and "revisionist" respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Some think that Jude 7, which mentions the men of Sodom going after "other/strange flesh" (*sarkos heteras*; NIV: "perversion"; ESV: "unnatural desire"), supports the traditional interpretation that Sodom's sin is homosexual sex. Perhaps. But it's possible to understand the

More could be said (and have been said!).<sup>6</sup> While it is probable that the same-sex nature of the gang-rape reinforces just how horrifically sinful Sodom had become (and also in the parallel of Judges 19), I think it is better to look elsewhere in the Bible to find clear texts that prohibit all forms of homosexual behaviour.

### LEVITICUS 18:22 AND 20:13

The next two verses that mention some sort of homosexual act come from Leviticus:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (Lev 18:22, ESV).

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Lev 20:13, ESV)

### Do Leviticus 18 and 20 prohibit only certain types of exploitative same-sex activity?

Some affirming scholars say that these two verses are only talking about certain types of exploitative same-sex activity: rape, temple prostitution, or a man on a boy. So, they have nothing to say about same sex behaviour in the context of a loving consensual monogamous relationship.

Are they really limited to these particular types of same-sex activity? I don't think so.

First, the commands in these two verses don't come with any qualifications that limit application to a particular type of same-sex activity. There is no mention of rape, coercion, age or power difference. No one is trying to force another person into having sex, like in the Sodom story.

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“other flesh” to refer not to people of the same sex, but to angels. These are the ones the men of Sodom were trying to rape. In the context, Jude 6 refers to angels. Furthermore, if homosexual relations were what Jude meant, it would have made more sense for him to say “same flesh” not “other flesh.” See Richard Bauckham, *Jude-2 Peter* (WBC 50; Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 54. Some ancient Jews interpreted Genesis 19 along the same lines without mentioning homosexual acts (for example, *Wisdom of Solomon* 19:13; *Book of Jubilees* 16:5-6; 20:5-6; *Testament of Levi* 14:6). Others believed that homosexual sex was part of the reason for destruction (Philo, *On Abraham* 133-41; *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4.37; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*. 1.194-95, 200-201). Some non-affirming scholars argue Ezek 16.49-50 does mention homosexual sex, in the “abomination” of v. 50. It is possible that Ezekiel thinks that part of Sodom's inhospitality was not just attempted gang rape, but attempted gang rape with the “abomination” of the Leviticus texts – homosexual intercourse. But it seems a stretch to join the dots like that. “Abomination” does not occur in Genesis 19. Ezekiel does not speak clearly of homosexual sex. “Abomination” occurs elsewhere in Ezekiel to refer to other sins. Nobody else in Scripture who speaks of Sodom uses “abomination.”

<sup>6</sup> For the argument that the sin of Sodom was in fact unnatural or homosexual practices, and so Gen 19 (along of with Judges 19) is relevant to the core question, see S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 203-21; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 80-84.

Second, if two men do sleep with each other, they are both morally culpable, and both punished: “They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own head” (20:13). The commands appear to include same-sex acts that are mutual and consensual; both partners are deemed guilty. If we are talking about some kind of exploitation with an “innocent victim”, then only the one doing the exploiting should be punished. This is the case in Deuteronomy 22:23–29 which lays out the punishment for two people (opposite sex) sleeping together. There, if it’s mutual, both are punished. But if there is coercion, only the rapist is guilty and punished.

Other affirming interpreters say that Leviticus 18 and 20 only prohibit male cult prostitutes.<sup>7</sup> These are men who offer sexual services to other men in cultic devotion to a pagan god. If this was what Leviticus is talking about, then the prohibitions have nothing much to say to our core question.

But, the Hebrew word that is usually translated “cult prostitute” in the OT - *qadesh* (e.g. 1 Kings 14:24) – is not used at in Leviticus 18 and 20. There is scarcely anything in the text, or the context, or from history that this prohibition only had male cult prostitution in view. I should add that this idea, that the ancient world (and Israel) was full of pagan cultic prostitution, has now been questioned by more recent scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

Leviticus simply prohibits men from having sex with other males, and there’s nothing in the context suggesting that prostitution (cult or not) is in view.

**Isn’t the underlying logic of Lev 18 and 20 misogynistic, that females are inferior to males? Do we really want to perpetuate this?**

Some affirming interpreters agree that both passages prohibit all forms of male-male sex. But, they argue, the *reason* Leviticus 18 and 20 gives for prohibiting male-male sex is because it makes the “receiver” act like a woman. “You shall not lie with a male *as with a female*” (18:22, NIV). The underlying logic is that men are superior to women. In male same-sex intercourse, the “receiver” is degraded in honour and status because he is acting like an inferior woman.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, if you want to quote Leviticus to condemn homosexual sex, then you must also import its underlying moral logic for the command to work. And the moral logic is an inherently degrading view of women. Do we really want to perpetuate this chauvinism today?

This is an interesting argument. But, it makes assumptions which are not there in the text. Yes, Leviticus 18 and 20 do highlight gender distinctions, but neither actually says that the distinctions are because women are inferior to men. There is nothing in either

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<sup>7</sup> Lee, *Torn*, 174-8, 182, assuming that cultic prostitution was prevalent in Israel.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Stephanie Budin shows there is little evidence to support the prevalence and even existence of cultic prostitution, in her book Stephanie Lynn Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); cited in Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 46. Furthermore, the Hebrew words *qadesh*, *qadeshah*, *qadeshim* don’t have to be translated “cult prostitute”. The root idea is basically “holy ones,” probably referring to some sort of service at a pagan shrine. But sexual service? There’s no strong or explicit connection.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 79-96; and Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, who uses the term “moral logic.”

passage that assumes a low view of women. Men should act like men, and women should act like women, not because men are superior to women, but because men and women were created differently. Different and equal, and both in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27).

So, the prohibitions against male-male sex in Leviticus 18 or 20 don't appear to be limited to particular types of same-sex activity. The language in the verses is general, and assumes mutual moral culpability and punishment. There is no mention of the status or power differential of the male partners. There's nothing that clearly limits the texts to prostitution, rape, or men having sex with boys. The most natural reading of the texts is that they prohibit all forms of male same-sex intercourse.

**Aren't the prohibitions in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 time-bound and culture-bound purity laws that were intended to keep Israel separate from the surrounding nations? Aren't these purity laws no longer binding on Christians?**

These same-sex prohibitions occur in the section of Leviticus that commands Israel not to live like the surrounding nations (Lev 18.3). The argument of affirming scholars is: As Christians, we are no longer bound to keep Israel's purity laws, so why do we harp on these two verses when we have no problems eating chilli crab, or *bah kut teh*, or wearing clothes that mix fabrics?

This is probably the best argument against the relevance of Leviticus 18 and 20 for Christians today. There is some merit to this line of argument. I don't think anyone should say that since Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are in the Bible they are therefore binding. This is not only simplistic but inconsistent. Otherwise, all of us would have to give up eating *char siew* rice. But, on the other hand, neither should we dismiss them just because they are in Leviticus. After all, there are lots of other laws from the OT that Christians still follow.

What we need to do is to figure out whether these specific laws are still authoritative for Christians in the new-covenant age, and in what way. In order to do so, the following considerations have to be taken into account:

First, this section in Leviticus (18–20) contains a whole string of commands that deal with various social (not just purity) issues in the life of Israel. And, most of the prohibitions are still relevant for Christians: incest (18:6–18; 20:11–14, 17, 19–21), adultery (18:20; 20:10), child sacrifice (18:21; 20:1–5), bestiality (18:23; 20:15–16), theft (19:11), lying (19:11), profaning the Lord's name (19:12), oppressing or robbing your neighbour (19:13), cursing the deaf or tripping up the blind (19:14), showing partiality law courts (19:15), slander (19:16), hating your brother (19:17), making your daughter a prostitute (19:29), turning to witches or necromancers (19:31). Actually, one of the most central commands for the Christian faith is found in this section: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (19:18). Clearly, many (not all) laws in Leviticus 18–20 are still authoritative or relevant.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> To be fair, there are some laws in this section which are no longer binding on Christians. The sacrificial laws (for example, 19:21–22) are fulfilled in Christ. Others are more difficult, such as the prohibitions against cattle interbreeding, or sowing two kinds of seed, or wearing different types of fabric (19:19) or shaving the edges of your beard (19:27). Most think these have similar functions as the food laws (which are explicitly abrogated), or had some significance in the

Then there are a few other laws in Leviticus 18–20 that contain a principle or a value that's still relevant today, even if the specific or concrete circumstances cannot be replicated. And so, Leviticus 19:10 instructs God's people not to gather fallen grapes from their vineyards but leave them for the poor. The principle of taking care of the poor is still relevant, but the specific or concrete circumstances of grapes and vineyards may not be.

In short, most of the commands in Leviticus 18–20 are applicable either in their full literal meaning, or in the underlying principle or value. This suggests it is more likely that 18:22 and 20:13 are still binding on Christians today in some way.

Second, and more specifically, almost all the laws relating to sexual activity in Leviticus 18–20 are still authoritative for Christians. For example, incest (18:6–18), adultery (18:20), bestiality (18:23), and offering your daughter into prostitution (19:29). One possible exception is the curious one in 18:19, which says a man shouldn't have sex with his wife while she is menstruating. The point is, almost all (maybe all) the sex prohibitions and commands in this section are still authoritative. Again, as with the first consideration, it seems more likely that the same-sex prohibitions are still authoritative.

The third observation is the most important. The best indication of whether an Old Testament law is still valid for Christians is to ask whether it's repeated in the New Testament. For example, prohibitions against lying, stealing, adultery, murder, drunkenness, are all repeated in the NT. As for eating pork and animal sacrifice, the NT actually says Christians are not bound.

So are the Levitical prohibitions against same-sex intercourse repeated in the New Testament? That's what we'll be examining in detail when we go to the NT texts. For now, let me just preview that and say that I think the prohibitions are indeed repeated, and are authoritative for Christians.

### **But authoritative in what way? What about the death penalty?**

Before we leave our examination of the OT texts, there's one remaining task. We need to talk about the death penalty at the end of Lev 20:13.

We may think it obvious that executing men who have same-sex intercourse no longer applies today. But do we realize how offensive Lev 20:13 sounds? Do we know how *scary* it sounds to gay and lesbian people, especially to the majority who have – at some point in their lives – faced bullying, discrimination, hatred and even physical abuse because of their orientation? Many popular level conservative Christian books don't mention the death penalty when Lev 20:13 is discussed.<sup>11</sup> I think this is huge blind spot that needs to change.

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specific culture in which Israel lived, and so are not binding on Christians. At least, there is nothing in the New Testament that repeats these commands.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, which is excellent, but it fails to mention this. The same is true for the relevant chapter in another very good resource: Fortson III and Grams, *Unchanging Witness*. One exception is Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), which discusses the death penalty in a footnote (!).

So, when we say that the prohibition of Lev 20:13 is still authoritative, what do we mean?

I think we mean that same-sex relations are still viewed negatively. It is still sin, an act of rebellion against God. But the stated judicial punishment no longer applies today, because God's people are now constituted differently under the New Covenant, in which God's dealings with his people have been dramatically changed with the coming of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, adultery is sin, and cursing of parents is sin, though the church doesn't put adulterers or sons who curse their parents to death, even if Lev 20:9 and 10 says so.

What Paul does in 1 Corinthians 5 provides a helpful analogy. There, a man was having sex with his stepmother ("his father's wife"). Paul says that this form of sexual immorality was so bad even the non-believers didn't tolerate it. Here's the interesting thing: Paul didn't say, "put those perverts to death." That's what Lev 20:11 says. What Paul prescribes instead is church discipline. Most scholars think he's instructing some kind of excommunication, to put the offender out into Satan's domain (that is, outside of the church) for the express purpose of his eventual restoration (1 Cor 5:5).<sup>13</sup> Death is not the last word, salvation is.

By analogy: Is the prohibition against same-sex relations in Leviticus still authoritative for Christians today? Yes. Does the death penalty still apply? Not literally. But some form of church discipline may, for the purpose of restoration. I know it's cumbersome, but if we wish to use this text in discussion, I think it is our duty to explain the whole picture – including what we do with that death penalty – and not just cite or quote or tweet the verse and leave it hanging.

Let's move on into the New Testament.

### **ROMANS 1:26-27**

Most interpreters agree that Romans 1 contains the most important passage in the debate about same-sex relations. In a wide-ranging argument sustained all the way through to Rom 3:26, the Apostle Paul shows how everyone is condemned without Christ, because we are all under sin. In the section that highlights the sins and sinfulness of the Gentiles, Paul says:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27, ESV)

That sounds like a straightforward critique of same-sex relations. What more needs to be said? But, there are interpretations of this text that affirm same-sex relations, or at

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<sup>12</sup> It's worth noting that the prohibitions were ever only addressed to God's people, not to outsiders.

<sup>13</sup> Paul uses the phrase "Purge the evil person from among you" (v. 13). This originally implied the death penalty in Deuteronomy (e.g., 17:7; 19:9), but Paul uses it to refer to the church discipline of excommunication, rather than the literal death penalty.

least argue that this text doesn't condemn loving, consensual, monogamous same-sex relations. Here are three examples of these affirming interpretations:

1. Paul is talking about heterosexuals having homosexual sex.

Some have argued that when Paul says they “exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature” (Rom. 1:26), he is referring only to those born with a heterosexual orientation. The problem, so the argument goes, is that these heterosexuals are acting contrary to their nature; that is, contrary to their orientation.<sup>14</sup> The implication is that what Paul says is not relevant to people who are born with a homosexual orientation. But is that what “contrary to nature” means: against one's personal sexual nature or orientation?

2. Paul is talking about pederasty (sex with boys).

In his influential book, *Homosexuality in the New Testament*, Robin Scroggs argued that the only form of homosexual practice known to Paul was pederasty (“love of boys”; which included an older man having sex with a boy). This must be what Paul is critiquing in Romans, so the argument goes, and therefore Romans 1 is irrelevant for our core question of loving, consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations.<sup>15</sup> But is pederasty the only form of same-sex practice that Paul is concerned about in Romans 1?

3. Paul is critiquing excessive lust.

Some argue that Paul does not condemn all same-sex relations, but only those that result from excessive lust and uncontrollable passions. This argument is based on the observation – entirely correct – that many Greco-Roman writers believed that same-sex intercourse was the byproduct of excessive lust. The idea is: some men got bored with having sex with women and, going out-of-control with desire for the exotic, started to have sex with other men.<sup>16</sup> If this is what Paul has in mind, then Romans 1 does not apply to loving, consensual, nonlustful same-sex relations that take place in same-sex marriages. This may be the best of the affirming interpretations of Romans 1. It's held by several who have recently written on the subject: Matthew Vines, James Brownson, and Yale scholar Dale Martin.<sup>17</sup> But is Paul in Romans 1 critiquing only same-sex relations that arise from excessive lust?

All these are interesting arguments that challenge the nonaffirming interpretation. What can we say about them? Three observations are pertinent.

### **The Language of Mutuality**

Just like what we saw in the Leviticus prohibitions, both parties involved in the sex act are considered morally culpable in Romans 1:26–27. He says this explicitly for male same-sex partners in v. 27, and probably implies it for female same-sex partners too.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. It's worth noting that this interpretation has losing favour even by more recent affirming scholars.

<sup>15</sup> Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Soranus, *On Chronic Disorders*, 4.9; Dio Chrysostom, 7.149, 151–52.

<sup>17</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*; Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*; Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*.



Furthermore, from what we know from history, female same-sex relations in the ancient world were mainly consensual. Unlike many male same-sex relations, they weren't pederastic or based on power differences between the parties.<sup>18</sup> So, when Paul condemns female same-sex activity in verse 26, and parallels it with male same-sex activity in verse 27, it seems best to understand Paul to be condemning all same-sex acts – including consensual same-sex acts.

All this renders Scroggs' "pederasty" interpretation highly unlikely. If pederasty was the only form of same-sex practice in view, why would Paul blame BOTH parties: man and boy? And, how does one account for Paul's mention of female same-sex relations, since pederastic relations were hardly known among females in the ancient world?

Nothing in Paul's actual language in Romans 1 limits condemnation to specific forms of same-sex relations. The language is all-inclusive, and it is the language of mutuality (in moral culpability and punishment). Paul doesn't refer to rape, or to pederasty, or to men having sex with male prostitutes. He never singles out the active or the dominant partner of the sex act, which would be what one expects if his condemnation was limited to exploitative same-sex activity. Yes, Paul would condemn all these forms of same-sex activity, but his language in Romans 1.26-27 is too general to be limited to those or any particular form of same-sex relations.

### The Language of Creation

The second observation is that Paul's argument here is filled with allusions to the Creation account of Genesis 1 and 2.<sup>19</sup> Paul mentions "ever since the creation of the world" (1:20); God as "the Creator" (1:25), He uses specific gender terms: "males" (*arsen*) and "females" (*theleiai*) (1:26-27), which two terms were paired in the Greek translation of Genesis 1:27, highlighting the different genders: "male and female he created them." But just in case we still don't get it, there is one more verse in Romans 1 which Paul goes over the top to point his readers to Genesis. It's in Rom 1:23:

[They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images [*eikonos*] in the likeness of [*homoomati*] mortal mankind [*anthropou*] and birds [*peteinon*] and animals and reptiles [*herpeton*].

Compare that with the Greek translation of Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind [*anthropon*] in our image [*eikona*], in our likeness [*homoiosin*], so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds [*peteinon*] in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the reptiles [*herpeton*] that move along the ground."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 59-60.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 288-92. But some affirming scholars have denied the link between Romans 1 and Genesis 1-2. See, for example, Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 52-55.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 92, for this point, and also his helpful formal translations.

You don't need to know a lot of Greek to see the five words in common in the space of a verse. It is reasonable to conclude that Paul writes Romans 1 with an intentional nod towards Genesis 1-2. But for what purpose?

Paul is drawing attention to the creation account because his argument is based on God's creation of humans into different biological sexes. In Genesis 1, God commissions humanity (male and female) to exercise dominion over the earth and its creatures. In Romans 1, Paul says that instead of worshiping God by exercising dominion over the earth and its creatures, they made idols of their fellow creatures of the earth and turned their back on their Creator. Humanity has departed from God's original intention; humanity has left the way God designed them to be as gendered humans. This triggers the "exchanges" in Romans 1: Humanity exchanges the Creator for creatures; females exchange sexual relations with males for females; males exchange sexual relations with females for males. Difference is exchanged for sameness. The relationship of communion with the other – Creator with creature, mirrored in the relationship of males with females (and vice versa) in marriage – collapses into a relationship of sameness.

For Paul, the same-sex acts in 1:26–27 violate gender boundaries, which go against the way humans were created as males and females. They are contrary to God's design or intention in creation.<sup>21</sup> Paul's disapproval then cannot be limited to some cultural way of behaving. For Paul, what is wrong with same-sex relations transcends culture. They go against the way God created males and females and intended them to relate to each other sexually.

### **"Contrary to Nature"**

The third observation concerns the phrase "contrary to nature" in 1:26. The Greek phrase is *para physin*. Some translations render this as "unnatural" (NIV).

What does *para physin* mean?

The phrase has a long history. Plato used it to refer to same-sex intercourse in his *Laws*.<sup>22</sup> It was then used by Graeco-Roman moral philosophers and Greek-speaking Jews, who believed that same-sex intercourse was contrary to the will of God or the design of nature.<sup>23</sup>

Many of these ancient writers critiqued or prohibited all sorts of sexual behaviour as immoral. Some condemned masturbation, others sex during menstruation, or even sex with an infertile wife. Still others considered any sex motivated by pleasure instead of parenthood to be sin. But, when they discussed sexual immorality, the phrase *para physin* is always used only for same-sex intercourse.<sup>24</sup> So, *para physin* was stock

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that every first-century Jew would have agreed with Paul at this point.

<sup>22</sup> "... the pleasure enjoyed by males with males and females with females seems to be *against nature (para physin)*, and the boldness of those who first engaged in this practice seems to have arisen out of an inability to control pleasure." Plato, *Laws*, 636B-D.

<sup>23</sup> See the studies of Richard B Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* (1986): 197-98; Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 241.

<sup>24</sup> See Philo, *Post.* 180-81 (masturbation); Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.32 (sex during menstruation); Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.36 (sex with an infertile woman); Rufus, *On Sexual Matters*, 12 (sex for mere

language used by other Roman and Jewish writers to condemn same-sex relations. Whether the same-sex relations were extramarital or marital, consensual or nonconsensual, pederastic or peer, they were *para physin* – against the design of nature. Paul appears to be simply using a well-known phrase in its usual context to refer to its typical referent.<sup>25</sup> And when he uses it in a context chock full with allusions to Genesis 1-2, he is saying that same-sex intercourse is contrary to the design and intention of the Creator.

This meaning of *para physin* throws serious doubts on some the affirming interpretations above. It means that Paul in Romans 1 cannot be talking about heterosexuals engaging in same-sex intercourse against their own personal sexual orientation.<sup>26</sup> That is not what *para physin* means.

Also, this meaning of *para physin* makes it unlikely that Paul is just condemning same-sex relations which are products of excessive lust. Paul never said that same-sex relations were wrong because they result from excessive lust. What he does say is that same-sex relations are *para physin*, and *para physin* does not mean excessive lust. As we have seen, Paul appears to be using *para physin* typically: the phrase implies that same-sex relations are a fundamental departure from how the Creator intended men and women to relate sexually.

And while we're on this excessive-lust interpretation, here are some further reasons that make this interpretation an unlikely one:

First, the excessive-lust interpretation doesn't work for female same-sex relations, which Paul mentions in Romans 1:26. Yes, many Graeco-Roman writers critiqued male-male same-sex acts on the basis of excessive lust. But, as far as we know, female same-sex relations were mutual, nonpederastic, and rarely (if ever) considered the byproduct of excessive lust. And yet, Paul still says that they are "contrary to nature."

Second, while Paul uses the terms "lust" (1:24), "passion" (1:26) and "desire" (1:27) in Romans 1, he doesn't talk about "excessive lust" in the same way that the other Graeco-Roman writers do. "Desire" (*epithumia*) and 'passion' (*pathos*) are considered wrong in Romans 1 not because such desires are excessive—Paul never says they are excessive—but because they grow into sinful sexual actions."<sup>27</sup> It is the action, not excessive desire, that Paul labels as *para physin*.

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pleasure). For these references, and the argument in this section generally, I am indebted to Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 96-98.

<sup>25</sup> "In Paul's time the categorization of homosexual practices as *para physin* was a commonplace feature of polemical attacks against such behavior, particularly in the world of Hellenistic Judaism. When this idea turns up in Romans 1 ..., Paul is hardly making an original contribution to theological thought on the subject; he speaks out of a Hellenistic-Jewish cultural context in which homosexuality is regarded as an abomination, and he assumes that his readers will share his negative judgment of it." Hays, "Relations," 194.

<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Paul's argument in Romans 1 is more of a corporate indictment of pagan society, not an evaluation of individual human beings based on their sexual orientation. See Hays, "Relations," 200.

<sup>27</sup> Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 100. Contra Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 160-66, who argues that it is not desire that Paul opposes, but excessive desire. But he has read into the text what is hardly there.

For Paul, same-sex relations are wrong because they are *para physin* – contrary to the Creator’s intention for male-female sexual relations. His language is general, and is the language of mutuality, and his condemnation applies to all forms of same-sex intercourse, not just exploitative, pederastic, temple prostitution, excessive-lust driven, or other more specific forms of same-sex activity. That negative appraisal also applies to those in our core question – loving, consensual, monogamous same-sex relations.

### **But remember the context ...**

The many allusions to the Creation account serve to bolster the idea that God does have a design for humanity to flourish, a design involving relationships of communion with the *other* – Creator with creature, male with female in marriage. This design for human flourishing has been spurned by sinful and idolatrous humanity.

If this is so, then it is actually NOT loving, and NOT promoting a person’s flourishing, if we encourage a person to pursue same-sex sexual intimacy. But, saying “no” to same-sex sexual intimacy flies in the face of contemporary culture, for which the deep resonances of the word “love” have become flattened into something approaching “indulgence.” It is also perceived as judgmental, and unloving.

And indeed those of us who say “no” must guard against judgmentalism. One way is to remember the context of Romans 1. Paul doesn’t write this chapter to condemn gay people. He writes it to condemn all people. Romans 1:26-27 is part of the section that leads up to the sad universal indictment: *All* are sinners. *All* people are under God’s wrath. *All* have chosen this for ourselves (Rom 3:19–20, and 23).

If we read in context, there cannot be any sense moral pride or spiritual superiority. It would be extraordinarily hypocritical for us to look on with disgust and revulsion at the homosexual acts of Romans 1, but at the same time ignore our own pride, boastfulness, envy, covetousness, judgmentalism, and hypocrisy, all of which are also mentioned in Romans 1-2. To adapt popular saying, a beggar who has found bread and looks down on another beggar who hasn’t, is only a hypocritical, proud beggar.<sup>28</sup>

### **1 CORINTHIANS 6:9 AND 1 TIMOTHY 1:10**

Do 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 mention some form of same-sex behaviour? Most agree yes. But there is debate among scholars over what kind of same-sex behaviour Paul is referring to.

Many of us are unaware of this, because the usual English versions we rely on have settled the matter for us, for better or worse. The issue is about the meaning and translation of two Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoites*.

This is how the updated NIV renders these verses:

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 who have sex with men [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*] nor thieves nor the

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<sup>28</sup> D.T. Niles is thought to have said “Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”

greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9–10, NIV2011)

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality [*arsenokoitai*], for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Tim 1:9–11, NIV2011)

We read the NIV or the ESV, both the products of evangelical scholarship, and wonder what the fuss is about. Aren't the texts clear?

### ***Malakoi* and *Arsenokoites* in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10**

1 Corinthians 6:9 (NIV) renders the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, not with two equivalent English words, but as a phrase: “men who have sex with men.” The ESV also uses a phrase: “men who practice homosexuality.” But is this the correct translation?

Affirming scholars say this is over-interpreted. They say the meanings of these two Greek words are unknown, or are too uncertain for them to be used to condemn all homosexuals.<sup>29</sup> As Dale Martin of Yale says: “I am not claiming to know what *arsenokoites* meant. I am claiming that no one knows what it meant.”<sup>30</sup> Some want to limit the words to some sort of exploitative same-sex behaviour like male prostitution or pederasty. That way, 1 Cor 6:9 has nothing to say about the core question of consensual, loving, monogamous same-sex relations. We have seen this interpretive move earlier, in the discussions of other texts: limiting the application to particular exploitative forms of same-sex activity.

Nonaffirming scholars usually say that *malakoi* refers to the passive partner in male homosexual intercourse, while *arsenokoites* refers to the active partner, hence the translated phrase in the NIV2011 and ESV. This is actually stated in the footnotes in both versions.

What are the issues involved with these two words?

### ***Malakoi***

*Malakoi* is the plural form of the adjective *malakos*, which means “soft” or “delicate.”<sup>31</sup> The context of 1 Cor 6:9 is that of a vice or sin list. *Malakoi* is one in a list which includes the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, greedy, drunkards, and so on. From this we know that *malakoi* refers to a certain kind of person involved in some sort of sinful action. But what kind?

<sup>29</sup> See Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 43, though he goes on to propose “some particular kind of economic exploitation.”

<sup>31</sup> The word is used for “soft clothing” in Matt 11:18. Outside of 1 Cor 6, Matt 11:18, together with the parallel in Luke 7:25, are the only other time *malakos* is used in the NT.

We have to look at how other people in the Graeco-Roman world used this word, since Paul never uses this word in his other letters. When we do, we find that *malakos* was used to describe men who looked and acted like women. They acted like women, talked like women, or they had sex like women (that is, they were penetrated). These are men who fundamentally confused gender distinctions by the standards of the ancient Roman world.<sup>32</sup>

By itself, *malakos* does not mean “the passive partner in male homosexual intercourse.” The word is much broader than that, and dependant on the standards of gender distinction in the ancient Roman world. So, a man who showed too much public affection to his wife would be *malakos*, because that showed lack of control, which, by the standards of Graeco-Roman culture, was considered womanly. And, a man who shaved his chest hair was *malakos*, since chest hair was a sign of manliness. However, if a man was willing to shave this manly chest foliage, this would make people wonder what other unmanly acts he was willing to engage in. And so, a Roman writer says that a man lacking in body hair is evidence that he played the passive role in sex from other men.<sup>33</sup>

As Preston Sprinkle has helpfully summarized: Not every person accused of being a *malakos* necessarily engaged in sex with other men, but every man who played the passive role in homosexual sex could be called *malakos*.<sup>34</sup> *Malakos* doesn't have to refer only to same-sex intercourse, but it often did.

Paul uses the word in 1 Corinthians 6:9 without further explanation. It refers to effeminacy in the Roman sense; that is, a man who is trying to be a woman. Does that include same-sex activity? Possibly, because it often did in surrounding culture. And, this is important, Paul is writing to the Greek city of Corinth with the assumption that they do know what the word means. Maybe the next word in Paul's list can help us further.

### ***Arsenokoites***

If the scholarly disagreement over *malakos* is a minor skirmish, the debate over what *arsenokoites* means is a full-blown war. The problem is two-fold:

First, this is the first time the word occurs in all of the ancient Greek literature we have. We can't compare how earlier or contemporary writers have used the word (like we did with *malakoi*), because there are none.

Secondly, and worse, the word *arsenokoites* occurs in a list of vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. Lists are hard to interpret. If Paul had said something like: “And the *arsenokoites* looked deeply in the eyes of his boyfriend, and kissed him,” that would have made things easier. We would have some story context to figure out what Paul

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<sup>32</sup> In his *Special Laws*, Philo used *malakoi* to describe certain “men-women” who “desired wholly to change their condition for that of women.” This includes, he adds, wearing heavy makeup and thick perfume, getting their hair curled, dressing in women's clothes, getting castrated, and playing the passive role in sexual intercourse with other men. In fact, this last thing Philo also calls *para physin* “contrary to nature.” *Spec. Laws* 3:37–41; cf. *Abr.* 135–37. An example of how the Latin equivalent for “soft” is used can be found in Lucan, 10.133–34, for castrated youth.

<sup>33</sup> Martial 2.62.

<sup>34</sup> Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 107.

meant. But here, Paul simply lists the word. All we know is that it refers to persons, who are associated with some kind of sinful behaviour.

So how can we interpret this word? Or, to put it another way, what made the translators of the NIV and ESV come up with what they have?

Here are some considerations:

### 1. What do the different parts of the compound word *arsenokoites* mean by themselves?

*Arsenokoites* is actually a compound word made up of two Greek words: *arsen* and *koite*. *Arsen* simply means “male.” It refers to the male gender irrespective of age. *Koite* simply means “a structure for lying down” or “bed.” With a verbal idea, it can carry the extended sexual meaning of “to sleep with,” i.e., sexual intercourse. We know of other compound words that have *koite* in them, and they often carry a sexual meaning. So *doulokoites* – formed by *doulos* (“slave”) and *koite* (“bed”) – means “one who has sex with slaves.” *Metrokoites* – from *meter* (“mother”) and *koite* (“bed”) means “one who has sex with his mother.” Following the same logic, *arsenokoites* may refer to someone who sleeps with other males.<sup>35</sup>

But we’ve got to be very careful when we determine the meaning of a compound word based on its individual parts. As Dale Martin rightly points out, words may have a completely different meaning than the sum of its parts.<sup>36</sup> “Butterfly”, for, has nothing to do with with a dairy product, or a house pest. But this doesn’t mean that *arsenokoites* cannot mean “one who sleeps with other males.” After all, “businessman” does mean someone who engages in business, and “birdwatcher” does mean someone who watches birds.

So, *arsenokoites* may mean what the parts suggest – “men who sleep with other men” – but it’s not conclusive. Let’s look at some additional evidence.

### 2. Does the Old Testament contain any similar words or phrases that may inform Paul’s use of the word *arsenokoites*?

The Hebrew Old Testament was also translated into Greek about a hundred years before Christ. We call this Greek version the Septuagint. Most New Testament writers actually read from this translation.

We can’t find the exact word *arsenokoites* in the Septuagint. But, we can find a similar phrase made up of the individual parts. *Arsen* and *koite* are found in close proximity in two very significant verses of the Greek Old Testament, which we have come across before. Here is what the Greek of the relevant portion looks like, with a very wooden translation:

Leviticus 18:22: *kai meta arsenos ou koimethese koiten gunaikeian*  
 “and you shall not lie with a male with the lying of a woman”

<sup>35</sup> See David F Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἀρσενοκοῖται (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1: 10),” *VC* 38 (1984): 125-53.

<sup>36</sup> Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 39.

Leviticus 20:13: *kai hos an koimethe meta arsenos koiten gynaikos . . .*  
 “and whoever lies with a male with the lying of a woman ...”

The similarity is striking, especially in Leviticus 20:13. The two words *arsenos* and *koiten*, which form Paul’s compound word *arsenokoites*, occur right next to each other.

So we have Paul, the Pharisee, the expert on the Law; using a compound word *arsenokoites*, the parts of which can mean “one who sleeps with males,” which parts are also very similar to the only two verses in the entire Old Testament that talk about men sleeping with males. Some affirming scholars ignore or downplay the Leviticus connection.<sup>37</sup> But other affirming scholars are fairer with this evidence, and admit that Paul possibly or even probably had Leviticus in mind when he uses *arsenokoites*.<sup>38</sup> I’m convinced enough to conclude that Paul wrote *arsenokoites* with Leviticus in the background.

### 3. Does the word occur anywhere in other Jewish literature?

We also know that many later Jewish writers used a Hebrew phrase *mishkab zakur* (“lying with a male”). This Hebrew phrase reflects the wording of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and was widely used in Judaism to describe same-sex relations.<sup>39</sup>

Both the Hebrew phrase *mishkab zakur* and the Greek word *arsenokoites* are almost identical to the wording of Leviticus 20:13. Paul is bilingual; he knows Hebrew and Greek. He’s writing to an audience in 1 Corinthians that only knows Greek. He uses a Greek word apparently based on the Greek of Leviticus 20:13, which parallels the Hebrew phrase *mishkab zakur* which is used in Judaism to refer to male same-sex intercourse. All the evidence points towards translating *arsenokoites* as “men who have sex with males.”

Furthermore, *arsenokoites*, whenever it’s used in later Christian writings, and whenever it’s translated into other languages (Latin, Coptic, Syriac) consistently takes on the meaning “men who have sex with males.”<sup>40</sup>

### Summary for *Malakoi* and *Arsenokoites* in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

First, the two words that form the compound word *arsenokoites* can mean “men who sleep with males.” Second, *arsenokoites* seems to have been derived from Leviticus 18:22 and especially 20:13, where *arsen* and *koite* occur and are used to prohibit male same-sex intercourse. Third, the Hebrew equivalent *mishkab zakur* (“lying with a

<sup>37</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 338-54, doesn’t mention it; Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 271 and Lee, *Torn*, 185, both call the connection “speculative.”

<sup>38</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 126 (“possibly”); Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 83, 108 (“almost certainly”). But both go on to propose that *arsenokoites* refers to pederasty.

<sup>39</sup> *b. Sanh.* 54a (the focus here is on pederasty, but the passage goes on to apply Lev 20:13 to sexual relations between a man and another male “whether an adult or a minor”); see also *b. Shabb.* 17b; *b. Sukkah* 29a; *y. Ber.* 9.50.13c; *b. Niddah* 13b. See Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 111-12.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.26.22-23; quoted in Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 318; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, 6.1; Origen, *Expositions on Proverbs* 7.74. The discussion is found in Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 114-15.



male”) was used as a technical term in Jewish writings for same-sex intercourse based on Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

It looks like there is good evidence for understanding *arsenokoites* to refer to men who have sex with other males. And, since Paul lists *malakoi* right before *arsenokoites*, it is reasonable to take *malakoi* to mean men who cross gender boundaries by receiving sex from other men. *Arsenokoites* then would refer to the active partner in same-sex intercourse.

Some affirming scholars agree with this, but limit the meaning to particular forms of same-sex relations. They say that *malakoi* are “call boys” who sell themselves to other men, and that *arsenokoites* are the men who pay for the services of the *malakoi*. Other scholars say that 1 Corinthians 6:9 refers to pederasty. Certainly Paul’s words include such people, but the words and associated usage are so general there is no compelling reason to limit the meaning to prostitution or pederasty.

Furthermore, if Paul had pederasty in view, why didn’t he use one of the many terms available that refer specifically to pederasty? After all, there were other Greek words that were widely used by Christians, Jews, pagans, to refer to pederasty: *paiderastes* (“the love of boys”), or *paidophthoros* (“corruptor of boys”) or *paidophthoreo* (“seducer of boys”). Jewish authors especially used the latter two terms to condemn the practice. Why not these more specific words, if this is the more limited meaning that Paul had in mind?

### ***Arsenokoites* in 1 Timothy 1:10**

Paul uses *arsenokoites* one other time in 1 Timothy 1:10. Like 1 Corinthians 6, *arsenokoites* occurs in a list of vices, but this time without the term *malakoi*. It doesn’t seem too different from Paul’s use of the same word in 1 Corinthians 6. It refers to men who play the active role in same-sex intercourse.

For Paul in these two texts, *malakoi* refers to men who thoroughly cross gender boundaries by receiving sex from other men. *Arsenokoites* refers to men who play the active role in having sex with other males. The negative appraisal of such acts includes those that take place in a loving, consensual, monogamous same-sex relationship.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have examined the texts that have traditionally been identified as speaking explicitly about same-sex relations. I’ve given brief introductions to some of the interpretations of these passages that argue that the Bible does not condemn consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations. We’ve tried to listen carefully, but apart from the story of Sodom’s destruction in Gen 19 – which I think is not directly relevant – the others do either assume or argue that same-sex activity of all kinds are contrary to the purpose of God, and are expressions of humanity’s sinful rebellion against God.

But I think it would be against the shape of the gospel to end here. Too often discussions of this sort end with kind of mental stop: “Yes that’s that, thank God the church has interpreted this correctly all this time. This is sin, and it is to be condemned.” But that’s not exactly Gospel, is it? At least, not yet.

One of the dangers of examining a couple of verses in detail is that we can often miss the forest for the trees. Let me end with Wesley Hill's observation on these New Testament texts, situating them in their gospel-shaped larger context.

One of the most striking things about the New Testament's teaching on homosexuality is that, right on the heels of the passages that condemn homosexual activity, there are, without exception, resounding affirmations of God's extravagant mercy and redemption. God condemns homosexual behaviour and amazingly, profligately, at great cost to himself, lavishes his love on homosexual persons.<sup>41</sup>

And so, Paul says in 1 Cor 6:9-11:

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 who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-10, NIV2011)

Harsh. But in the immediate next verse, Paul goes on to pronounce: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (v. 11). That sound you hear is the ring of good news, Gospel, that the "unrighteous" may be redeemed. Sinners – gay or straight – may be forgiven and made holy as God's treasure no matter what they've done in the past.

Then in 1 Timothy 1:9-11, Paul lists a rogues gallery of sinners, "lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers." (1 Tim 1:9-10, NIV2011)

Grim. But again, just a few verses down, we hear from Paul the ring of gospel: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (v. 15), including the all the types of sinners he just mentioned, including those who practice homosexuality.

In Romans 1:26-27, as part of Paul's sweeping indictment of all humanity, we hear the specific charge sheet for Gentiles:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27, ESV)

But what follows in the next section in Romans 3:21-26 is an astonishing display of God's righteousness, revealed in the atoning work of Christ. It is astonishing because God's righteousness, instead of judging us for our sins, covers and erases them permanently, and brings us into covenant relationship with God. The condemnation of

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<sup>41</sup> Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 62.

Rom 1:26-27 is there precisely as a counterpoint for all of us to hear one of the grandest and most powerful statements of the gospel: “All (who) have sinned ... are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:23-24). All our sins —whether we are Jew or Gentile, gay or straight, murderer or moralist — have been dealt with in Christ. All of us can be made righteous by God as a gift. *All* are sinners, *all* can be made righteous.

This gospel promises forgiveness of sins – all sins, including homosexual acts – to anyone who will receive it through Jesus’ death and resurrection. I trust we all agree these verses must never be detached from their life-giving, gospel-pointing purpose.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> As Hays says, “Paul’s references to homosexual conduct place it within the realm of sin and death, to which the cross is God’s definitive answer. The judgment of Romans 1 against homosexual practices should never be read apart from the rest of the letter, with its message of grace and hope through the cross of Christ.” Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 393.

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