

Homosexuality and the Bible by the Rev. Dr. Walter Wink

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Sexual issues are tearing our churches apart today as never before. The issue of homosexuality threatens to fracture whole denominations, as the issue of slavery did a hundred and fifty years ago. We naturally turn to the Bible for guidance, and find ourselves mired in interpretative quicksand. Is the Bible able to speak to our confusion on this issue?

The debate over homosexuality is a remarkable opportunity, because it raises in an especially acute way how we interpret the Bible, not in this case only, but in numerous others as well. The real issue here, then, is not simply homosexuality, but how Scripture informs our lives today.

Some passages that have been advanced as pertinent to the issue of homosexuality are, in fact, irrelevant. One is the attempted gang rape in Sodom (Gen. 19:1-29). That was a case of ostensibly heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them "like women," thus demasculinizing them. (This is also the case in a similar account in Judges 19-21.) Their brutal behavior has nothing to do with the problem of whether genuine love expressed between consenting adults of the same sex is legitimate or not. Likewise Deut. 23:17-18 must be pruned from the list, since it most likely refers to a heterosexual prostitute involved in Canaanite fertility rites that have infiltrated Jewish worship; the King James Version inaccurately labeled him a "sodomite."

Several other texts are ambiguous. It is not clear whether 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10 refer to the "passive" and "active" partners in homosexual relationships, or to homosexual and heterosexual male prostitutes. In short, it is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone, or promiscuity and "sex-for-hire."

Unequivocal Condemnations

Putting these texts to the side, we are left with three references, all of which unequivocally condemn homosexual behavior. Lev. 18:22 states the principle: "You [masculine] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (NRSV). The second (Lev. 20:13) adds the penalty: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them."

Such an act was regarded as an "abomination" for several reasons. The Hebrew prescientific understanding was that male semen contained the whole of nascent life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the woman provided only the incubating space. Hence the spilling of semen for any nonprocreative purpose--in coitus interruptus (Gen. 38:1-11), male homosexual acts, or male masturbation--was considered tantamount to abortion or murder. (Female homosexual acts were consequently not so seriously regarded, and are not mentioned at all in the Old Testament (but see Rom. 1:26). One can appreciate how a tribe struggling to populate a country in which its people were outnumbered would value procreation highly, but such values are rendered questionable in a world facing uncontrolled overpopulation.

In addition, when a man acted like a woman sexually, male dignity was compromised. It was a degradation, not only in regard to himself, but for every other male. The patriarchalism of Hebrew culture shows its hand in the very formulation of the commandment, since no similar stricture was formulated to forbid homosexual acts between females. And the repugnance felt toward homosexuality was not just that it was deemed unnatural but also that it was considered unJewish, representing yet one more incursion of pagan civilization into Jewish life. On top of that is the more universal repugnance heterosexuals tend to feel for acts and orientations foreign to them. (Left-handedness has evoked something of the same response in many cultures.)

Whatever the rationale for their formulation, however, the texts leave no room for maneuvering. Persons committing homosexual acts are to be executed. This is the unambiguous command of Scripture. The meaning is clear: anyone who wishes to base his or her beliefs on the witness of the Old Testament must be completely consistent and demand the death penalty for everyone who performs homosexual acts. (That may seem extreme, but there actually are some Christians urging this very thing today.) It is unlikely that any American court will ever again condemn a homosexual to death, even though Scripture clearly commands it.

Old Testament texts have to be weighed against the New. Consequently, Paul's unambiguous condemnation of homosexual behavior in Rom. 1:26-27 must be the centerpiece of any discussion.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

No doubt Paul was unaware of the distinction between sexual orientation, over which one has apparently very little choice, and sexual behavior, over which one does. He seemed to assume that those whom he condemned were heterosexuals who were acting contrary to nature, "leaving," "giving up," or "exchanging" their regular sexual orientation for that which was foreign to them. Paul knew nothing of the modern psychosexual understanding of homosexuals as persons whose orientation is fixed early in life, or perhaps even genetically in some cases. For such persons, having heterosexual relations would be acting contrary to nature, "leaving," "giving up" or "exchanging" their natural sexual orientation for one that was unnatural to them.

In other words, Paul really thought that those whose behavior he condemned were "straight," and that they were behaving in ways that were unnatural to them. Paul believed that everyone was straight. He had no concept of homosexual orientation. The idea was not available in his world. There are people that are genuinely homosexual by nature (whether genetically or as a result of upbringing no one really knows, and it is irrelevant). For such a person it would be acting contrary to nature to have sexual relations with a person of the opposite sex.

Likewise, the relationships Paul describes are heavy with lust; they are not relationships between consenting adults who are committed to each other as faithfully and with as much integrity as any heterosexual couple. That was something Paul simply could not envision. Some people assume today that venereal disease and AIDS are divine punishment for homosexual behavior; we know it as a risk involved in promiscuity of every stripe, homosexual and heterosexual. In fact, the vast majority of people with AIDS the world around are heterosexuals. We can scarcely label AIDS a divine punishment, since nonpromiscuous lesbians are at almost no risk.

And Paul believes that homosexual behavior is contrary to nature, whereas we have learned that it is manifested by a wide variety of species, especially (but not solely) under the pressure of overpopulation. It would appear then to be a quite natural mechanism for preserving species. We cannot, of course, decide human ethical conduct solely on the basis of animal behavior or the human sciences, but Paul here is arguing from nature, as he himself says, and new knowledge of what is "natural" is therefore relevant to the case.

Hebrew Sexual Mores

Nevertheless, the Bible quite clearly takes a negative view of homosexual activity, in those few instances where it is mentioned at all. But this conclusion does not solve the problem of how we are to interpret Scripture today. For there are other sexual attitudes, practices and restrictions which are normative in Scripture but which we no longer accept as normative:

1. Old Testament law strictly forbids sexual intercourse during the seven days of the menstrual period (Lev. 18:19; 15:19-24), and anyone in violation was to be "extirpated" or "cut off from their people" (kareth, Lev. 18:29, a term referring to execution by stoning, burning, strangling, or to flogging or expulsion; Lev. 15:24 omits this penalty). Today many people on occasion have intercourse during menstruation and think nothing of it. Should they be "extirpated"? The Bible says they should.
2. The punishment for adultery was death by stoning for both the man and the woman (Deut. 22:22), but here adultery is defined by the marital status of the woman. In the Old Testament, a man could not commit adultery against his own wife; he could only commit adultery against another man by sexually using the other's wife. And a bride who is found not to be a virgin is to be stoned to death (Deut. 22:13-21), but male virginity at marriage is never even mentioned. It is one of the curiosities of the current debate on sexuality that adultery, which creates far more social havoc, is considered less "sinful" than homosexual activity. Perhaps this is because there are far more adulterers in our churches. Yet no one, to my knowledge, is calling for their stoning, despite the clear command of Scripture. And we ordain adulterers.
3. Nudity, the characteristic of paradise, was regarded in Judaism as reprehensible (2 Sam. 6:20; 10:4; Isa. 20:2-4; 47:3). When one of Noah's sons beheld his father naked, he was cursed (Gen. 9:20-27). To a great extent this nudity taboo probably even inhibited the sexual intimacy of husbands and wives (this is still true of a surprising number of people reared in the Judeo-Christian tradition). We may not be prepared for nude beaches, but are we prepared to regard nudity in the locker room or at the old swimming hole or in the privacy of one's home as an accursed sin? The Bible does.
4. Polygamy (many wives) and concubinage (a woman living with a man to whom she is not married) were regularly practiced in the Old Testament. Neither is ever condemned by the New Testament (with the questionable exceptions of 1 Tim. 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6). Jesus' teaching about marital union in Mark 10:6-8 is no exception, since he quotes Gen. 2:24 as his authority (the man and the woman will become "one flesh"), and this text was never understood in Israel as excluding polygamy. A man could become "one flesh" with more than one woman, through the act of sexual intercourse. We know from Jewish sources that polygamy continued to be practiced within Judaism for centuries following the New Testament period. So if the Bible allowed polygamy and concubinage, why don't we?
5. A form of polygamy was the levirate marriage. When a married man in Israel died childless, his widow was to have intercourse with each of his brothers in turn until she bore him a male heir. Jesus mentions this custom without criticism (Mark 12:18-27 par.). I am not aware of any Christians who still obey this unambiguous commandment of Scripture. Why is this law ignored, and the one against homosexual behavior preserved?
6. The Old Testament nowhere explicitly prohibits sexual relations between unmarried consenting heterosexual adults, as long as the woman's economic value (bride price) is not compromised, that is to say, as long as she is not a virgin. There are poems in the Song of Songs that eulogize a love affair between two unmarried persons, though commentators have often conspired to cover up the fact with heavy layers of allegorical interpretation. In various parts of the Christian world, quite different attitudes have prevailed about sexual intercourse before marriage. In some Christian communities, proof of fertility (that is, pregnancy) was required for marriage. This was especially the case in farming areas where the inability to produce children-workers could mean economic hardship. Today, many single adults, the widowed, and the divorced are reverting to "biblical" practice, while others believe that sexual intercourse belongs only within marriage. Both views are Scriptural. Which is right?
7. The Bible virtually lacks terms for the sexual organs, being content with such euphemisms as "foot" or "thigh" for the genitals, and using other euphemisms to describe coitus, such as "he knew her." Today most of us regard such language as "puritanical" and contrary to a proper regard for the goodness of creation. In short, we don't follow Biblical practice.

8. Semen and menstrual blood rendered all who touched them unclean (Lev. 15:16-24). Intercourse rendered one unclean until sundown; menstruation rendered the woman unclean for seven days. Today most people would regard semen and menstrual fluid as completely natural and only at times "messy," not "unclean."

9. Social regulations regarding adultery, incest, rape and prostitution are, in the Old Testament, determined largely by considerations of the males' property rights over women. Prostitution was considered quite natural and necessary as a safeguard of the virginity of the unmarried and the property rights of husbands (Gen. 38:12-19; Josh. 2:1-7). A man was not guilty of sin for visiting a prostitute, though the prostitute herself was regarded as a sinner. Paul must appeal to reason in attacking prostitution (1 Cor. 6:12-20); he cannot lump it in the category of adultery (vs. 9).

Today we are moving, with great social turbulence and at a high but necessary cost, toward a more equitable, non-patriarchal set of social arrangements in which women are no longer regarded as the chattel of men. We are also trying to move beyond the double standard. Love, fidelity and mutual respect replace property rights. We have, as yet, made very little progress in changing the double standard in regard to prostitution. As we leave behind patriarchal gender relations, what will we do with the patriarchalism in the Bible?

10. Jews were supposed to practice endogamy--that is, marriage within the twelve tribes of Israel. Until recently a similar rule prevailed in the American South, in laws against interracial marriage (miscegenation). We have witnessed, within the lifetime of many of us, the nonviolent struggle to nullify state laws against intermarriage and the gradual change in social attitudes toward interracial relationships. Sexual mores can alter quite radically even in a single lifetime.

11. The law of Moses allowed for divorce (Deut. 24:1-4); Jesus categorically forbids it (Mark 10:1-12; Matt. 19:9 softens his severity). Yet many Christians, in clear violation of a command of Jesus, have been divorced. Why, then, do some of these very people consider themselves eligible for baptism, church membership, communion, and ordination, but not homosexuals? What makes the one so much greater a sin than the other, especially considering the fact that Jesus never even mentioned homosexuality but explicitly condemned divorce? Yet we ordain divorcees. Why not homosexuals?

12. The Old Testament regarded celibacy as abnormal, and 1 Tim. 4:1-3 calls compulsory celibacy a heresy. Yet the Catholic Church has made it mandatory for priests and nuns. Some Christian ethicists demand celibacy of homosexuals, whether they have a vocation for celibacy or not. But this legislates celibacy by category, not by divine calling. Others argue that since God made men and women for each other in order to be fruitful and multiply, homosexuals reject God's intent in creation. But this would mean that childless couples, single persons, priests and nuns would be in violation of God's intention in their creation. Those who argue thus must explain why the apostle Paul never married. And are they prepared to charge Jesus with violating the will of God by remaining single?

Certainly heterosexual marriage is normal, else the race would die out. But it is not normative. God can bless the world through people who are married and through people who are single, and it is false to generalize from the marriage of most people to the marriage of everyone. In 1 Cor. 7:7 Paul goes so far as to call marriage a "charisma," or divine gift, to which not everyone is called. He preferred that people remain as he was--unmarried. In an age of overpopulation, perhaps a gay orientation is especially sound ecologically!

13. In many other ways we have developed different norms from those explicitly laid down by the Bible. For example, "If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, you shall cut off her hand; show no pity" (Deut. 25:11f.). We, on the contrary, might very well applaud her for trying to save her husband's life!

14. The Old and New Testaments both regarded slavery as normal and nowhere categorically condemned it. Part of that heritage was the use of female slaves, concubines and captives as sexual toys, breeding machines, or involuntary wives by their male owners, which 2 Sam. 5:13, Judges 19-21 and Num. 31:18 permitted--and as many American slave owners did some 150 years ago, citing these and numerous other Scripture passages as their justification.

The Problem of Authority

These cases are relevant to our attitude toward the authority of Scripture. They are not cultic prohibitions from the Holiness Code that are clearly superseded in Christianity, such as rules about eating shellfish or wearing clothes made of two different materials. They are rules concerning sexual behavior, and they fall among the moral commandments of Scripture. Clearly we regard certain rules, especially in the Old Testament, as no longer binding. Other things we regard as binding, including legislation in the Old Testament that is not mentioned at all in the New. What is our principle of selection here?

For example, virtually all modern readers would agree with the Bible in rejecting: incest, rape, adultery, and intercourse with animals. But we disagree with the Bible on most other sexual mores. The Bible condemned the following behaviors which we generally allow: intercourse during menstruation, celibacy, exogamy (marriage with non-Jews), naming sexual organs, nudity (under certain conditions), masturbation (some Christians still condemn this), birth control (some Christians still forbid this).

And the Bible regarded semen and menstrual blood as unclean, which most of us do not. Likewise, the Bible permitted behaviors that we today condemn: prostitution, polygamy, levirate marriage, sex with slaves, concubinage, treatment of women as property, and very early marriage (for the girl, age 11-13).

And while the Old Testament accepted divorce, Jesus forbade it. In short, of the sexual mores mentioned here, we only agree with the Bible on four of them, and disagree with it on sixteen!

Surely no one today would recommend reviving the levirate marriage. So why do we appeal to proof texts in Scripture in the case of homosexuality alone, when we feel perfectly free to disagree with Scripture regarding most other sexual practices? Obviously many of our choices in these matters are arbitrary. Mormon polygamy was outlawed in this country, despite the constitutional protection of freedom of religion, because it violated the sensibilities of the dominant Christian culture. Yet no explicit biblical prohibition against polygamy exists.

If we insist on placing ourselves under the old law, as Paul reminds us, we are obligated to keep every commandment of the law (Gal. 5:3). But if Christ is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), if we have been discharged from the law to serve, not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6), then all of these biblical sexual mores come under the authority of the Spirit. We cannot then take even what Paul himself says as a new Law. Christians reserve the right to pick and choose which sexual mores they will observe, though they seldom admit to doing just that. And this is as true of evangelicals and fundamentalists as it is of liberals and mainliners.

Judge for Yourself

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is simply that the Bible has no sexual ethic. There is no Biblical sex ethic. Instead, it exhibits a variety of sexual mores, some of which changed over the thousand year span of biblical history. Mores are unreflective customs accepted by a given community. Many of the practices that the Bible prohibits, we allow, and many that it allows, we prohibit. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period.

The very notion of a "sex ethic" reflects the materialism and splitness of modern life, in which we increasingly define our identity sexually. Sexuality cannot be separated off from the rest of life. No sex act is "ethical" in and of itself, without reference to the rest of a person's life, the patterns of the culture, the special circumstances faced, and the will of God. What we have are simply sexual mores, which change, sometimes with startling rapidity, creating bewildering dilemmas. Just within one lifetime we have witnessed the shift from the ideal of preserving one's virginity until marriage, to couples living together for several years before getting married. The response of many Christians is merely to long for the hypocrisies of an earlier era.

I agree that rules and norms are necessary; that is what sexual mores are. But rules and norms also tend to be impressed into the service of the Domination System, and to serve as a form of crowd control rather than to enhance the fullness of human potential. So we must critique the sexual mores of any given time and clime by the love ethic exemplified by Jesus. Defining such a love ethic is not complicated. It is non-exploitative (hence no sexual exploitation of children, no using of another to their loss), it does not dominate (hence no patriarchal treatment of women as chattel), it is responsible, mutual, caring, and loving. Augustine already dealt with this in his inspired phrase, "Love God, and do as you please."

Our moral task, then, is to apply Jesus' love ethic to whatever sexual mores are prevalent in a given culture. This doesn't mean everything goes. It means that everything is to be critiqued by Jesus' love commandment. We might address younger teens, not with laws and commandments whose violation is a sin, but rather with the sad experiences of so many of our own children who find too much early sexual intimacy overwhelming, and who react by voluntary celibacy and even the refusal to date. We can offer reasons, not empty and unenforceable orders. We can challenge both gays and straights to question their behaviors in the light of love and the requirements of fidelity, honesty, responsibility, and genuine concern for the best interests of the other and of society as a whole.

Christian morality, after all, is not a iron chastity belt for repressing urges, but a way of expressing the integrity of our relationship with God. It is the attempt to discover a manner of living that is consistent with who God created us to be. For those of same-sex orientation, as for heterosexuals, being moral means rejecting sexual mores that violate their own integrity and that of others, and attempting to discover what it would mean to live by the love ethic of Jesus.

Morton Kelsey goes so far as to argue that homosexual orientation has nothing to do with morality, any more than left-handedness. It is simply the way some people's sexuality is configured. Morality enters the picture when that predisposition is enacted. If we saw it as a God-given gift to those for whom it is normal, we could get beyond the acrimony and brutality that have so often characterized the unchristian behavior of Christians toward gays.

Approached from the point of view of love rather than that of law, the issue is at once transformed. Now the question is not "What is permitted?" but rather "What does it mean to love my homosexual neighbor?" Approached from the point of view of faith rather than works, the question ceases to be "What constitutes a breach of divine law in the sexual realm?" and becomes instead "What constitutes integrity before the God revealed in the cosmic lover, Jesus Christ?" Approached from the point of view of the Spirit rather than the letter, the question ceases to be "What does Scripture command?" and becomes "What is the Word that the Spirit speaks to the churches now, in the light of Scripture, tradition, theology, and, yes, psychology, genetics, anthropology, and biology?" We can't continue to build ethics on the basis of bad science.

In a little-remembered statement, Jesus said, "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:57 NRSV). Such sovereign freedom strikes terror in the hearts of many Christians; they would rather be under law and be told what is right. Yet Paul himself echoes Jesus' sentiment when he says, "Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!" (1 Cor. 6:3 RSV). The last thing Paul would want is for people to respond to his ethical advice as a new law engraved on tablets of stone. He is himself

trying to "judge for himself what is right." If now new evidence is in on the phenomenon of homosexuality, are we not obligated--no, free--to re-evaluate the whole issue in the light of all the available data and decide what is right, under God, for ourselves? Is this not the radical freedom for obedience in which the gospel establishes us?

Where the Bible mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that Biblical judgment is correct. The Bible sanctioned slavery as well, and nowhere attacked it as unjust. Are we prepared to argue today that slavery is biblically justified? One hundred and fifty years ago, when the debate over slavery was raging, the Bible seemed to be clearly on the slaveholders' side. Abolitionists were hard pressed to justify their opposition to slavery on biblical grounds. Yet today, if you were to ask Christians in the South whether the Bible sanctions slavery, virtually everyone would agree that it does not. How do we account for such a monumental shift?

What happened is that the churches were finally driven to penetrate beyond the legal tenor of Scripture to an even deeper tenor, articulated by Israel out of the experience of the Exodus and the prophets and brought to sublime embodiment in Jesus' identification with harlots, tax collectors, the diseased and maimed and outcast and poor. It is that God sides with the powerless. God liberates the oppressed. God suffers with the suffering and groans toward the reconciliation of all things. In the light of that supernal compassion, whatever our position on gays, the gospel's imperative to love, care for, and be identified with their sufferings is unmistakably clear.

In the same way, women are pressing us to acknowledge the sexism and patriarchalism that pervades Scripture and has alienated so many women from the church. The way out, however, is not to deny the sexism in Scripture, but to develop an interpretive theory that judges even Scripture in the light of the revelation in Jesus. What Jesus gives us is a critique of domination in all its forms, a critique that can be turned on the Bible itself. The Bible thus contains the principles of its own correction. We are freed from bibliolatry, the worship of the Bible. It is restored to its proper place as witness to the Word of God. And that word is a Person, not a book.

With the interpretive grid provided by a critique of domination, we are able to filter out the sexism, patriarchalism, violence, and homophobia that are very much a part of the Bible, thus liberating it to reveal to us in fresh ways the inbreaking, in our time, of God's domination-free order.

An Appeal for Tolerance

What most saddens me in this whole raucous debate in the churches is how sub-Christian most of it has been. It is characteristic of our time that the issues most difficult to assess, and which have generated the greatest degree of animosity, are issues on which the Bible can be interpreted as supporting either side. I am referring to abortion and homosexuality.

We need to take a few steps back and be honest with ourselves. I am deeply convinced of the rightness of what I have said in this essay. But I must acknowledge that it is not an air tight case. You can find weaknesses in it, just as I can in others'. The truth is, we are not given unequivocal guidance in either area, abortion or homosexuality.

Rather than tearing at each others's throats, therefore, we should humbly admit our limitations. How do I know I am correctly interpreting God's word for us today? How do you? Wouldn't it be wiser for Christians to lower the decibels by 95 percent and quietly present our beliefs, knowing full well that we might be wrong?

I know of a couple, both well known Christian authors in their own right, who have both spoken out on the issue of homosexuality. She supports gays, passionately; he opposes their behavior, strenuously. So far as I can tell, this couple still enjoy each other's company, eat at the same table, and, for all I know, sleep in the same bed.

We in the church need to get our priorities straight. We have not reached a consensus about who is right on the issue of homosexuality. But what is clear, utterly clear, is that we are commanded to love one another. Love not just our gay sisters and brothers who are often sitting beside us, unacknowledged, in church, but all of us who are involved in this debate. These are issues about which we should amiably agree to disagree. We don't have to tear whole denominations to shreds in order to air our differences on this point. If that couple I mentioned can continue to embrace across this divide, surely we can do so as well.