

## **If heterosexual marriage is the norm, what scriptural foundation was used to justify change in ministry policies?**

The first thing to say as we begin is that both those who are opposed to the adopted changes and those who are in favor of the new policies are taking stands each believes is prayer based and faithful to scripture. Secondly, it is also true that as we look at particular scripture passages, those who argue on both sides of the issue do so with the seven commonly referenced Biblical passages that reference homosexual activity. How these seven passages are interpreted has contributed to the wide spectrum of disagreement the ELCA is facing, not solely on the issue of homosexuality but on the nature of God's Word in general.

Third, in the study process leading up to the development of the social statement, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" there was a study guide produced that dealt briefly on the seven passages we will examine. In fact, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Council sent a letter to the ELCA Church Council specifically asking for "a succinct summary of the scriptural basis for the assembly's actions that can be distributed to congregations to assist in further conversations;" The reply from the ELCA Church Council references differing understandings about how to read the commonly referenced seven scriptural prohibitions about same sex behavior and points back to an essay in the Journey Together Faithfully series. I will include the interpretations that were included in this study so that we may better understand how other Lutherans interpret this differently.

### **Seven referenced prohibitions against homosexual behavior.**

Genesis 19:1-11

This is frequently the first text that people turn to regarding homosexual behavior. The story presupposes that Sodom is a morally bankrupt city. Genesis 18:20 is the first reference to Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, one learns more in Ezekiel about Sodom's depravity than in this text. Ezekiel 16:49 identifies Sodom's sins as: pride, gluttony, prosperous ease to the point of ignoring the poor and need. They were haughty (full of themselves) and did abominable things. Here is a case of one scripture passage from Ezekiel 16 informs the context of another Biblical passage, the story of Sodom.

In Genesis 18:20-33 we hear a dialog between Abraham and God. The question Abraham keeps pressing is how much mercy is God going to show. Will he spare Sodom if as few as 50 people are righteous? How about 45 or 40 or all the way down to 10 righteous persons? Ten persons who are righteous is still a critical mass for God to extend mercy and spare the entire city.

We then move to Chapter 19 where two angels or messengers appear before Lot in the city. Lot is very worried for their welfare. He wishes to shield the strangers from the citizens of Sodom. He extends hospitality by showing them to his house.

The story does not tell us why the men of the city desire to "know" the visitors. One of meanings of the Hebrew *Yadha'* is to "know"; it refers to sexual activity. The fact that all the men are involved highlights the depravity of the city. Power is very important. To

force oneself on another is to exert control over that person. In other words, the men of Sodom are exerting control over the strangers. This is a story about rape.

Lot's attempt to save the men is a further example of the brokenness of the city and of the historical reality of the world. Lot offers his two daughters in exchange for the welfare of the angels. Remember, women are treated in this period as property, without any dignity outside of the woman's spouse. The men are outraged that Lot would make such a proposal so they attempt to rape Lot. Again, the men of Sodom are trying to exert their control. The men of Sodom are then blinded and the city destroyed before anything happens to Lot's daughters.

Interestingly, when the Bible speaks of the sins of Sodom, homosexuality is not regularly lifted up.

- Examples include Jeremiah 23:14. "But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing; they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all them become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah."
- Ezekiel 16:49-50a. "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abominable things before me;..." Biblical scholars acknowledge that "abominable things" refers to sexual immorality. However, it is widely disagreed upon whether such immorality speaks of homosexual behavior as in the type that some want to equate with marriage.
- Jude vs. 7 "Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." Here again, rape would be an example of un-natural lust. Sexual immorality is not solely limited to homosexual activity.

### **Interpretations**

For many interpreters of the Bible, these stories have traditionally counted as a witness to Israel's condemnation of homosexual conduct, especially between males. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has been thought to be specific evidence of God's anger at such behavior. Moreover, the mention of the destruction of these cities in Jude 7 is specifically linked to "sexual immorality" and "unnatural lust."

For some interpreters, homosexual rape does not make consensual homosexual conduct wrong any more than heterosexual rape makes heterosexual sex wrong. Since every male in Sodom (19:4) threatened to rape the angels/men, these would-be rapists would have to have been mostly heterosexual men. Their motive was to demonstrate who was in charge, a motive shared by other rapists. These interpreters also use the principle of Scripture interprets Scripture when they point out that while there are more than twenty-five biblical references to Sodom, only Jude 7 explicitly mentions that Sodom's problem was sexual in nature (and, in view of Jude 6, the issue seems to be

intercourse with angels). The sins of Sodom are most explicit in Ezekiel 16:49: pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and not aiding the poor and needy—sins often ignored in this conversation. In addition, Jesus uses the Genesis 19 passage to condemn inhospitality (Matthew 10:14–15), not same-sex conduct.

Genesis 19:12-29

The purpose of the angels visit becomes clear. They are here to rescue Lot from the destruction the Lord is about to bring down upon Sodom. In the attempt to spare his family Lot's sons-in-law fail to believe him. The only ones who escape then are Lot, his wife (who looks back and is consumed into a pillar of salt) and Lot's two daughters.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

These two text fall into the larger grouping of text starting at Chapter 17 and running through chapter 26. This section known as the "Holiness Code" addresses how one lives in community. Sexuality is but one component of community life addressed in these chapters among other topics such as the slaughtering of animals in Ch. 17, laws related to ritual and moral holiness among which are: eating meat that is anything less than well done, rendering unjust judgment against a neighbor, practicing witchcraft, rounding off the hair on your temples, and tattoos to name just and the penalties for violating such holiness rules. Celebrating appointed festivals, the use of offerings and those offerings deemed acceptable as well as the holiness of priests are also prescribed in these chapters of Leviticus.

Both of these verses appear in larger sections of text outlining other prohibited sexual behavior. When looking at the wider context in which these two verses appear, what is lifted up is that sexual expression limited to the confines of a husband-wife relationship (See Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith* pg. 193). Directly challenged in these texts is the issue of sexual promiscuity. Sexual promiscuity was a significant issue in Biblical times as it is a significant issue in today's world.

The meaning in these passages is highly significant. Both passages describe the laying of a man with another man as an abomination. The Hebrew word (to'evah) "connotes something more serious than breaking a Jewish law or custom. 'To'evah' comes from the root meaning of the word 'to hate' or 'to abhor'. An abomination is literally something detestable and hated by God." Glesne, 104.

The word Abomination occurs 48 times in the Bible, all but two are in the Old Testament. The word is not limited to same-sex expression. Things described as an abomination include eating the left over flesh of a sacrifice on the third day (Lev. 7:18), cheating customers in the marketplace (Prov. 11:1), crooked minds (Prov. 11:20), all those who are arrogant (Prov. 16:5), etc. The point being is that when we look at abominations we can more easily see our own behavior falling into such categories.

While it may be easy to dismiss some of the Levitical Codes, it is important that we are not abandoning all of them. Okay, so we may eat at Red Lobster and enjoy crabs,

shrimp, lobster or other prohibited shell fish. Okay, so you may be wearing two different kinds of fabric. However, no one would argue for rejecting the entire Levitical Code especially such passages that outlaw incest and bestiality.

### **Interpretations**

In the interests of the good order of the human community, Christian communities through the centuries have affirmed the continuing applicability of the law regarding male same-sex intercourse (Leviticus 18:22). The Leviticus text (vv. 22–30) repeatedly calls such intercourse an “abomination,” that is, a detestable practice. The condemnation of male same-sex intercourse is supported by other biblical texts such as Romans 1:18–32. While the creation stories are not specifically referred to in Leviticus, concern for preserving God’s male-female design for creation may lie behind this view that male same-sex intercourse is a detestable practice.

More recently, some interpreters have asked whether the law in Leviticus 18:22 is as straightforward as it appears to be. All other sexuality laws in Leviticus 18 deal with behaviors on the part of heterosexuals. Is that not also the case in 18:22? Consensual homosexual relationships do not appear to be in view, they argue. Moreover, the word “abomination” covers a wide range of human behaviors, including intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period (Leviticus 18:19, 30; Ezekiel 22:10), remarriage after divorce (Deuteronomy 24:4), and cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5).

Again, remember that the first use of the law is to maintain good order. The on-going debate around these two verses from Leviticus center around whether they are still needed for good order in society today. Those in favor of a wider acceptance of homosexual relationships see them as no longer relevant, equating such laws to those prohibiting the eating of shellfish, for example. Those opposed see these verses in a similar light to the intent of human sexual relationships instituted by God.

### **Judges 19:22-25**

This passage is very similar to the story of Sodom we have looked at in Genesis 19; the difference here is that the city is Gibeah. This story starts with the hospitality of an old man to a stranger. The stranger (a Levite) is passing through. The old man of Ephraim welcomes the stranger into his home. A perverse lot tries to have intercourse with the stranger. The host offers his daughter and concubine in exchange for this vile desire of the men. The men react by raping the concubine and leaving her dead at the doorstep of the man’s home. The man ultimately mutilates the concubine. “The apparently ritual act of dividing his concubine into twelve parts was calculated to stir up his fellow Israelites against the Benjaminites for their infamous deed.” The Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 2, pg. 813.

Again, this is a story not of same-sex behavior but of rape and power. The lack of hospitality among the community is also highlighted.

In both the Genesis and Judges texts those who have argued for change in the ministry policies of our church emphatically distinguish between the same sex rapes described in

these passages from the loving relationships that same-sex couples seek in their relationships.

First Corinthians 6:9-10

“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.”

One of the key points in understanding this particular passage comes in looking closely at the Greek. The Greek word “malakoi” can be translated as meaning “soft”. This would be a derogatory term that would refer to men who acted like women and would offer themselves in prostitution. Thus, those see this term as not referring to a same sex couple in a monogamous life-long committed relationship.

The second Greek word is “arsenekoitai”. This is a combination of two Hebrew words from which the English translates as sodomites. It literally refers in the Hebrew as to lie with a male. Biblical Scholar Robin Scroggs notes that this Greek word which is a combination of two Hebrew words (arsenos and koiten) are deliberately vague in their interpretation compared to other Greek terms that are more specific to homosexual behavior that Paul could have used.

Some translations of the Bible, including the 1946 Revised Standard Version have translated arsenekoitai as homosexual. That translation is not accurate as there are persons who are homosexual in their orientation that are celibate. This translation is referring to specific actions.

This Greek word is limited in Biblical use to this passage and that of First Timothy 1:10. Such specific usage leads many to believe that Paul is referring back to Leviticus texts that speak about men engaging in homosexual behavior.

Now, this leads to two different conclusions. One group will translate this as referring to issues of male rape and prostitution, neither of which is compatible with what is intended by publically accountable life-long monogamous same-sex relationships. Others will see this as referring back to the prohibitions found in Leviticus from which the Greek Word originates from the Hebrew. Both sides will agree that Paul is very adamant in his concern for the growing sexual immorality in Corinth. This can be seen back in Chapter 5:1 and 9 as well as Ch. 6:13-20.

When one looks at the whole list there are a lot of sinners lumped together. Thus, it is not appropriate to highlight one group of sinners as being totally cut off from the kingdom of God. In this way, we are all on equal footing. Also on equal footing is that these behaviors describe a previous way of life. This is a way of life for those before they are justified by God’s grace through faith. All of these behaviors are not compatible with those who have been washed (ie. baptized). This will be similar to what we find in later in First Timothy and in Romans.

First Timothy 1:9-11

“This means understanding the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

In the typical Pauline style there is a list of sins comparable to those in First Corinthians and in other New Testament letters. There are similar questions in the meaning of the Greek words that we've already discussed in the First Corinthians text. Some argue from the Greek words used that they flow together into one phrase as opposed to singularly listed items. That would mean the prohibition would be specifically against male rape and prostitution with other males.

One thing to especially note in this list of behaviors that is distinct is that the negative actions coincide with the pattern of the first 8 out of 10 Commandments: Glense highlights the issue in this way:

Godless and sinful	First Commandment
Unholy and profane	Second and Third Commandment
Kill father and mother	Fourth Commandment
Murderers	Fifth Commandment
Fornicators, sodomites	Sixth Commandment
Slave traders	Seventh Commandment
Liars and perjurers	Eight Commandment

Such a breakdown is contrary to those who would argue for the more specific reading. Thus, there is a distinction between the Greek words: *pronos* – meaning fornicators, *arsenkoitai* – sodomites, and *andropodistes* – slave traders.

### **Interpretations**

The precise meaning of the two Greek words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (translated in the NRSV as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites”), one of which also occurs in 1 Timothy 1:10, has been disputed by Bible scholars. The terms have been variously translated.

Clearly, the two words refer to some form of male same-sex behavior that is regarded as sinful. The nature of that activity is not clear. Could it refer to the sort of same-sex relationships between men and boys that was characteristic of the surrounding Greek culture? Possibly, but not necessarily. Do the passages condemn all expressions of same-sex conduct without exception? Some say, yes. Others say that the uncertainties of the word meanings make this sweeping a censure risky. Still others say that, despite the alleged uncertainties of translation, the combination of these passages with others that reject same-sex intercourse guarantees that they are part of a clear and larger picture of biblical disapproval.

## Romans 1:18-32

The book of Romans is written to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, those who believe in Christ and those who don't. In this letter, Paul works to show how the Good news of Jesus Christ is for all people. He starts by addressing the human reality that all are sinful, regardless of whether one is Jew or Greek.

These verses are part of a wider section of text whereby Paul makes the point that all humanity is guilty. No one has escaped the power of sin. Every one of the ten commandments is represented in Paul's listing, though not in order.

Verses 26 and 27 most directly deal with same-sex behavior. "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 due penalty for their error."

This is the only passage that refers to same sex behavior among women. Debate here centers around what Paul means by exchanging the natural for unnatural. First let us look at the interpretations offered in the Journey Together Faithfully Study II.

### Interpretations

Almost all students of the Bible agree that this passage is the most important of all for the Bible's assessment of homosexuality. First of all, this is the only place where both gay and lesbian sexual conduct is mentioned (1:26–27). Secondly, because Paul decries same-sex intercourse as one manifestation of sinful behavior—sexual and otherwise—among the many that display the fruits of idolatry, we see homosexual conduct placed in a clear theological context of universal human sinfulness and need for God's redemption that goes back to Adam (Romans 5:12–19).

Some interpreters would emphasize that Paul's description of same-sex intercourse as exchanging "natural intercourse for unnatural," seems to indicate an appeal to God's intention that the norm for sexuality in creation is heterosexual. What is "natural" is God's will for what the creation ought to be. The idea some have had that Paul is condemning only certain forms of same-sex behaviors because they are promiscuous or exploitative is questioned because the basis for condemnation is that the acts are unnatural. His appeal to what is "natural" versus what is "unnatural" expresses his conviction that all have a basic knowledge of divine will in creation. To this some would add that Paul is also drawing on his familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures by reflecting Leviticus 18 in his prohibition of same-sex acts.

Other interpreters contend that "natural" refers to what is conventional rather than to the structure of creation. The Greek word for natural is not a synonym for creation. This would open the door to the suggestion that Paul's evaluation of

such behavior was reflective of his cultural context and not the timeless design of God's creation. Furthermore, some would argue, Paul's idea of "exchanging" natural for unnatural relations conveys the notion that same-sex conduct is a willful act, like the other sins listed, and not the expression of a given orientation.

The word natural is not synonymous with creation. In the current debate within the church it has been argued that same-sex behavior is natural for individuals with a homosexual orientation. This is frequently expressed by many as saying, this is how God made me.

However, this does not change what Paul lifts up as behaviors that are contrary to God's intent. In the larger context of this passage all these behaviors are evidence of abandoning the one true God. Paul does not place these behaviors in terms of what is most destructive. All are equal against God's desire for humankind. To make the argument that homosexual behavior is natural for some and thus does not fall into the category of what Paul is speaking against would be to open the door to concluding that the other behaviors mentioned are also natural for some, thus it would be "natural" to lie, or to practice other degrading behaviors.

"...his point is that homosexual behavior is a distortion of the creator's design and that such practices are evidence, not of the intention of any specific individual to indulge in such practice for its own sake, but of the tendency within an entire society for humanness to fracture when gods other than the true one are being worship." NITB pg. 434.

"Rather, (Paul's) argument is that the existence of homosexual practice in a culture is a sign that that culture as a whole has been worshipping idols and that its God-given male and female order is being fractured as a result. NITB pg. 435.

The listed Interpretations in this section are reprinted from *Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality*. [Differences in font settings distinguish my work from that copied from this study. The sections which begin, interpretations are from this work. The font style consistent with the rest of this study indicates my research.]

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The Reverend Doctor Walter F. Taylor, Jr. in writing the study material *Journey Together Faithfully Part II*, has offered a critique of the final draft that was subsequently approved. His critique was made on July 26, 2009 about three weeks before the Churchwide Assembly vote to change ministry policies. Among his critique he writes, "...the documents provide no biblical or theological arguments for why the ELCA should adopt the proposed changes.