The Bible & Homosexuality

Introduction
The reason we’re looking at what the Bible says about homosexuality is because of several foundational beliefs that Christians have about reality. The first is that God exists. Second, He created everything. Third, God has revealed who He is most specifically through the words of the Bible, and in particular through the person Jesus Christ, whom the Bible calls the “Word of God.” For Christians to understand an issue like homosexuality, we can’t rely on our limited logic, our surrounding culture, or our preferences to explain to us how to think. We must instead rely on God—the One who created us, knows His specific purposes for us, and loyally loves us. We must look to the words of the Bible, with special reference to the person Jesus.

A biblical view of homosexuality is rooted in a clear understanding of God’s original creation of the world and continues to be clarified through understanding of the “new creation” of humanity that takes place in Christ Jesus.

The Old Testament and Homosexuality

1. Creation
In the creation account in Genesis 1-2, we see that God created and ordered all things. The height of his creation was humanity. This creature, the human, was made “in His own image.”\(^1\) God made humanity so that it demonstrated His nature. Of all the creatures, humanity most clearly reflected what God was like. And God created this divine image as “male and female.”\(^2\) At the very outset, God “hard-wired” the male and female genders into humanity. These genders appear to be a direct reflection of God’s character, which would mean both genders together demonstrate some absolute, eternal essence in the nature of God.

In Genesis 1-2, the divine image expressed in the human genders is clarified even further. The man was created first, yet appeared to be incomplete.\(^3\) God made other creatures in an effort to remedy this deficiency in the man, yet none were adequate.\(^4\) Finally, God removed an integral, inner part of the man and from it created woman.\(^5\) In response to her creation, the man recognized that the woman was “bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.”\(^6\) She was fundamentally of the same stuff that man was; she was an extension of his existence. Yet she was also separate from and other than him. And she was related this man unlike any other creature. Man was incomplete prior to woman’s existence. With her, he was a complete human. They were, together, the divine image. The completion, or “complementarity,” that the woman brought to man was explained in more detail in Genesis 2:24. Here the biblical writer said that, for the

\(^{1}\) Genesis 1:27
\(^{2}\) Genesis 1:27
\(^{3}\) Genesis 2:18
\(^{4}\) Genesis 2:19-20
\(^{5}\) Genesis 2:22-23
\(^{6}\) Genesis 3:23
reason of this complementarity of man and woman, the man will leave his father and mother, and “be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

Three basic realities about humanity are introduced in this short passage:

*Marriage.* In marriage, the separateness of personhood that God created when he made woman from the stuff of man is joined back together. To make woman, God separated a portion of the man’s flesh. In marriage, the separated flesh is reunited into one, yet each member retains his/her distinct personhood. This is a mystery that, in the New Testament, we will begin to see in the Trinity, where we learn that God is one God, yet is at the same time more than one distinct Person.

*Sexuality.* The language of “joined” and “one flesh” in Gen. 2:24 is a clear reference to the physical complementarity of male and female. In their sexuality together, they physically become “one flesh.” Again, both male and female retain their distinct personhood during sexual intercourse. Yet, at the same time, during sexual intercourse, they are physically “one.”

*Family.* The third reality introduced in Genesis 2:24 is inseparably connected to human sexuality: the family. In human sexuality the concepts of “joined” and “one flesh” have an existence that goes beyond the moment of sexual intercourse. This existence is the procreation of another distinct person as a result of the complementary union of husband and wife. In this third person the man and woman are embodied as “one flesh.” Modern science has illustrated this reality in ways that the ancient world couldn’t have known. Yet they understood the essential basics: The “seed” of a man is incomplete on its own. Through the complementary physical union with his wife, the incomplete seed of the man is completed by the fertility of the woman and results in the appearance of a new person. Again, in the NT we will see the most complete reflection of the image of the Trinitarian God in humanity: The unity of a father, mother, and child, all of the same flesh, yet each distinct in their personhood.

So, the creation account found in Genesis 1-2, and most specifically explained in Gen. 1:26-28 and Gen. 2:24, reveal several things about human personhood, gender, and God’s intent for human sexuality: First, male and female are complementary beings, both necessary for the image of God to be expressed in humanity. Second, the way males and females express this complementary relationship is through marriage. Third, human sexuality is expressed in marriage between this male and female who complete each other. Fourth, procreation of family is the context in which God’s image is fully revealed through the joining of a husband and wife.

This original creation account gives us the framework for gender and sexuality, which in turn helps us to understand homosexuality. Before we discuss homosexuality, we must note a critical turn in the human story.

### 2. Distortion of Creation

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7 Genesis 2:24
Basic to the human story is the account given to us in Genesis 3. At creation we learn that God gave humans the ability to choose whether to participate with His purposes for them. This freedom was represented by a forbidden tree (i.e. “don’t eat of that tree”). The first male and female misused their freedom and acted against God’s purposes for them. The result was a distortion in human existence and all of creation. Male-female marriage complementarity was fundamentally damaged. Pain was introduced into childbirth. And death, and all of its manifestations (anxiety, shame, dread, fear, toil, starvation, etc.), entered human history. The worst consequence was the appearance of a rift between God’s relationship with humanity, which humanity could not repair. And it appears that the divine image in humanity was damaged so that it chronically felt the impulse to work against God’s purposes for itself and all of creation. Indeed, “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

This distortion of God’s purposes for His creation brought great grief to Him. Yet, in a stunning revelation of God’s character, the Bible narrates an extended redemption story in which God attempts to heal the distorted image of God in humanity, and restore it to its original created purpose. God initiates redemption through Abraham and Sarah, whose family will bless “all the families of the earth.” God’s redemption is worked out in history through the basic social unit of the family. And this family is intended to multiply into a people that reflects the divine image in its existence.

Yet, the entire redemption story is threaded with God’s consistent need to manage humanity’s inability to live out His original purposes for them. It is in the context of this redemption story —where God’s intentions for humanity are constantly thwarted and twisted—that homosexuality arises.

3. **God’s People and Homosexuality**
Perhaps the best-known reference to homosexuality in the Bible occurred in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham had a nephew who was living in Sodom which was a city that was characterized as having sin (the biblical term for the distortion of God’s creational purposes)
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that was “exceedingly grave.”18 This grave sin was demonstrated in the inhabitants’ desire to have homosexual intercourse with visiting men (angels that appear as men). From this passage it is clear that homosexual practice was considered outside of God’s purposes for humanity and was sinful. A similar instance occurred later in Judges 19:22-48, with the same assessment of homosexual practice.19

The redemptive storyline that began with Abraham’s family hit a major turning point in the Exodus narrative. At this point in their history, God rescued Abraham’s descendants from their Egyptian oppressors and led them into their own identity as a nation. A crucial component of their identity as God’s people was their reception of the “law” delivered through Moses. In the law God explained to his people—then identified as Israel—how they were to relate to him and to each other. He defined for them what it was to be human—what it was to live out the purposes hard-wired in humanity at creation. The law addressed the appropriate norms of human sexuality. Some of the major misuses of sexuality were defined as adultery,20 incest,21 bestiality22 and homosexuality.23 Homosexuality was described as an “abomination.”24 Further, the same denunciation was applied to the blurring of gender identity through cross-gender dressing.25

The practice of cult prostitution, frequently homosexual, was forbidden by the law.26 Over the course of Israel’s history she encountered, and even adopted, cult prostitution. Leaders of Israel that endorsed this practice were condemned while those that purged Israel of its practice were considered righteous. Cult prostitution was named “evil” and, like the descriptions in the law, an “abomination.”27

4. Summary of the OT and Homosexuality

The OT shows us that humanity was made in the image of God. What makes up that “image” are the male and female genders, which together reflect what God is like. The divine image is further expressed in the complementary, male-female union in marriage, which results in family, which becomes God’s basic building block for the redemption of humanity. Homosexual practice is completely forbidden for God’s people because it violates God’s purposes for humanity, chief of which is to reflect the nature of God.

18 Genesis 18:20
19 Some biblical interpreters argue against this view, saying that the primary sin in these instances was that of inhospitality. This argument ignores critical and obvious features of these stories. For more explanation see Robert Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice, pp. 71-90.
20 Lev. 18:20; 20:10
21 Lev. 18:6-18; 20:11-12, 14, 17, 19-21
22 Lev. 18:23; 20:15-16
23 Lev. 18:22; 20:13
24 Lev. 18:22; 20:13
25 Deut. 22:5
The New Testament and Homosexuality

1. Jesus
The New Testament presents Jesus as the culmination of God’s redemptive plan for humanity and all of creation. In Jesus, who in one person is God united with human nature, the original purposes for humanity are reclaimed and extended into a “new creation.” What humanity is meant to be is found in Jesus’ person and teachings. The primary audience for Jesus’ teaching were the people of Israel, at Jesus’ time most commonly referred to as Jews. Their understanding of human sexuality, including homosexual practice, was fundamentally defined by the OT law and their history as God’s people. Against this backdrop Jesus taught on human sexuality.

Jesus’ primary teachings on human sexuality can be found in his teachings on marriage. His teachings not only affirmed the OT teachings on sexuality, but intensified them. Jesus affirmed God’s original purpose for marriage as found in Genesis 1-2. He assumed the male-female relationship in marriage, and he placed the entirety of human sexuality in this monogamous, male-female marital relationship. But, in addressing the law and human sexuality, Jesus extended the significance of human sexuality beyond the physical act of sex. He insisted that human sexuality begins in the place of desire, and even this sexual desire, with or without the physical sexual act, must remain within the appropriate bounds of monogamous, male-female marriage. Jesus makes human sexuality an issue of the heart in addition to an act of the body. In fact, Jesus went so far as to say that the sexual impulse does not actually demand fulfillment. Sexual expression is not an inalienable right nor a undeniable need. Rather, it is to be honored and enjoyed only within the explicit boundary of a faithful, monogamous male-female marriage covenant. For Jesus, “Sexual purity is a necessity, sexual gratification is not.”

Finally, in the spirit of the OT, Jesus taught that sexual sin incurs the ultimate consequence: Eternal separation from God. The consequence of sexual sin is so dire that Jesus insists that any and all efforts must be made to avoid it. “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matt. 5:29).

2. Paul
Paul wrote from a Jewish background and clearly understood and affirmed the OT teachings on human sexuality. However, Paul’s audience frequently included those outside of the Jewish faith who would not have known the OT. So, Paul gave even more explicit explanation of appropriate human sexuality than Jesus did.

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28 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:9-30
29 Mark 10:5-9; Matt. 19:4-6
30 Matt. 19:10-12
32 Matt. 5:29-30; Mark 9:43-48; Matt. 18:8-9
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Paul, like Jesus, affirms God’s original purpose in Genesis 1-2 of male-female, monogamous marriage as the sole place for human sexuality. Paul expanded this further by explaining that the two primary expressions of sin that clearly defy God’s purposes for humanity are idolatry and homosexuality. This includes both male-male and female-female homosexual behavior.

Also like Jesus, Paul says that the sexual impulse need not be fulfilled. The proper location of sexuality is in monogamous, male-female marriage. That said, marriage is not for everyone. Accordingly, sexual expression is not for everyone.

Like the redemptive story begun in the OT with Abraham and Sarah and continued in their descendants (Israel), Paul saw family as God’s basic building block for the redemption of humanity. Those who trust in Jesus—the church—become the descendants of Abraham, which now include both Jew and non-Jews who put their faith in Christ. Paul saw the church as God’s household, or family, which is made up of smaller households—individual families. It is through God’s family, comprised of rightly ordered individual families, that God displays his glory to the universe. Just as in the OT, Paul sees family as fundamental and indispensable to God’s ultimate purposes for humanity.

Finally, like Jesus, Paul said that sex practiced outside of God’s original purposes will result in separation from relationship with God; exclusion from God’s kingdom.

Summary of NT and Homosexuality

The NT affirms and extends the OT view of human sexuality. The extension of the OT view of human sexuality is seen in Jesus’ intensification of sexual purity to include not only external acts but also internal thoughts. Also, the image of God in humanity is seen even more vividly in the NT with the revelation of God as Trinity. In the NT the divine image in humanity can be seen not only in the complementary male-female genders, but also in the completed picture of the human family: The unity of a father, mother, and child, all of the same flesh, yet each distinct in their personhood. The NT understands homosexuality as a distortion of God’s purposes for humanity and, as a result, unacceptable practice for those within God’s family. That said, another extension the NT makes beyond the OT regarding human sexuality is the potential for the transformation of the identity of the human person, which will be discussed below.

Summary of the Bible and Homosexuality

Based on the original intent for sexuality found in Genesis 1-2, and the affirmation and extension of that intent in the “new creation” in person of Jesus, the Bible shows us that God has a very specific purpose for human sexuality. His purpose excludes all forms of sexuality outside

34 Eph. 5:31
36 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, 25-28, 32-35, 40
37 Eph. 2:11-22; 3:4-6
38 Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Tim. 3:14-15; Gal. 6:10
39 Eph. 3:9-11; 5:15-6:9; Col. 3:18-21
40 Rom. 2:2; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:10-11
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of the monogamous, male-female marital relationship. Unlike some prevailing cultural concepts about it, sex is not simply a form of expressing love or increasing intimacy. Otherwise, every relationship, regardless of age, family relationship, gender, or even species, would be eligible for sexual relations simply to express love or create greater intimacy.\(^{41}\) Instead, human sexuality is designed to express the very nature of God in the complementary union of the male and female genders within the marital union. This union leads to family, which illustrates the Trinitarian nature of God. Additionally, family becomes the basic building block of God’s redemptive work as he builds his church family through rightly ordered individual families. Homosexual behavior cannot contribute to these purposes, and in fact, violates them. As a result, homosexual behavior is not endorsed or allowed by God and, like all sin, results in separation from Him.

**Toward a Pastoral Strategy**

1. **Compassion and Outreach**

   The NT shows us that Jesus had great love and compassion for sexual sinners.\(^{42}\) As a result, he reached out to them. Jesus risked misunderstanding, social stigma, and even physical danger with people like the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery.\(^{43}\) His reason for outreach was to offer forgiveness and transformation. Paul showed us that sexual sinners aren’t hopelessly bound to their life of sin.\(^{44}\) So, like Jesus and Paul, our appropriate stance toward those engaged in homosexual behavior is compassionate outreach, offering the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus, and the possibility of life transformation through the Holy Spirit.

2. **Identity: New Creation in Christ**

   One of the central, overarching NT concepts used to describe Christian identity is “In Christ.”\(^{45}\) Paul sums up the significance of being “in Christ” as that of becoming a “new creation.”\(^{46}\) This means that the person who places his faith in Jesus spiritually and psychologically takes on the identity of Jesus and is redefined by Jesus’ resurrected humanity. This means at least two significant things for the person who puts their faith in Jesus:

   - First, the believer’s identity is solely defined by the person and teachings of Jesus, not by his or her mistakes, history or sexuality. So, since Jesus defined the believer’s identity, no matter how an unbeliever self-identifies, when he becomes “in Christ” his identity is now defined by another—by Christ. Whatever Christ says he is, he is. So, if Christ says that he has a new sexual identity that is in line with God’s purposes, then he does.

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\(^{44}\) 1 Cor. 6:10

\(^{45}\) Rom. 6:11, 23; 8:1-2, 39; 12:5; 16:3, 7, 9, 10; 1 Cor. 1:2, 4, 5, 30, 3:1; 4:10, 15, 17; 15:18-19, 22, 31; 2 Cor. 1:19-21; 2:14, 17; 3:14; 5:17, 19, 21; 12:2, 19; 13:4; Gal. 1:22; 2:4, 16-17; 3:14, 26, 28; 5:6; Eph. 1:1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 20; 2:5-7; 10, 13; 3:6, 11, 12, 21; 4:21, 32; Phil. 1:1, 26; 2:1, 5, 3:3, 9, 14; 4:7, 19, 21; Col. 1:2, 4, 17, 19, 28; 2:5-7, 9-11; 1 Thess. 2:14; 4:14, 16; 5:18; 2 Thess. 1:12; 1 Tim. 1:14; 3:13; 2 Tim. 1:1, 9, 13; 2:1, 10; 3:12, 15; Philemon 8, 20, 23; 1 John 2:4-6, 27-28; 3:6, 9, 24; 4:13, 15-16; 5:20; 1 Pet. 3:16; 5:10, 14; Rev. 1:9

\(^{46}\) 2 Cor. 5:17
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• Second, every person who puts his faith in Jesus must let go of the life he had before he believed. Jesus makes that change possible. The new creation life in Christ gives believers the power to leave their old lives behind. This includes an old life of homosexual behaviors. As Paul said to the church in Corinth, among whom were homosexual sinners, “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11). So, someone struggling with homosexual practice is not unavoidably banished to these behaviors or their consequences. Jesus remakes him into someone new.

3. Cost of following Jesus
In Jesus, God has reached out to humanity in the costliest of ways. The terms under which Jesus receives our trusting response, and accordingly gives us new life, require the complete surrender of everything. Our trust in him involves obedience to His commands, exclusive devotion to His teachings, and priority commitment to His ways of living. We are to obey Jesus even when it is difficult and costly to us. This obedience includes the surrender of our sexuality. No place in our lives is off limits to God’s ownership. That said, Jesus assures us that surrender to God is worth every bit of the price. Even better, he promises to help us to surrender, since ultimate surrender is beyond our own strength.

4. Church Discipline
Jesus and Paul both advocated church discipline—the loving intervention of God’s family—for the purpose of healing. Jesus and Paul both made it clear that a failure to turn away from sexual sin would result in ultimate separation from God. So, both Jesus and Paul see as normative, and necessary, the intervention of the church to help God’s family members leave a lifestyle of sin.

47 1 Cor. 6:10
49 Matt. 10:22; Luke 6:26-28; Mark 8:34-35
50 Matt. 13:44
51 Acts 1:8; Romans 8:1-17; Gal. 5:16-25
52 Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:6-11; 7:8-13; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15.
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