

Human Sexuality and Our Future in the UMC

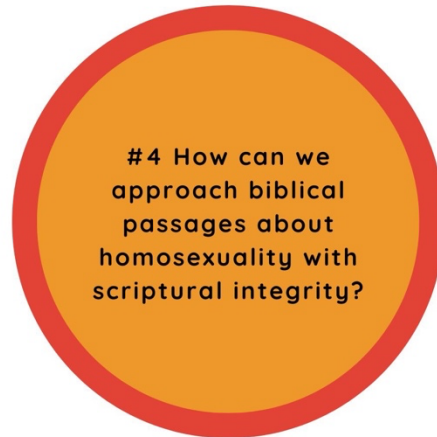
Circle #4

Part A

“How Can We Approach Biblical Passages About Homosexuality with Scriptural Integrity?”

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Fig. 4.1



Only seven biblical passages refer to same-sex relations, and all references are negative, which settles the issue for those who assume these texts are clear, universal, and timeless. Others are curious about these passages and want to understand the context better; therefore, some have asked:

If someone believes homosexuality is not inherently sinful, how can they justify this view with what the Bible says?

This paper and the one next week will attempt to answer this critical question. I will not tell you what to believe; instead, I'll present the facts surrounding how people who do not view homosexuality as wrong approach these biblical texts. You can evaluate these interpretations for yourself. Regardless of where you end up, there is room at the First United Methodist Church of Florence for all of us. As Wesley said,

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.” –John Wesley

I'll cover four of the seven Scriptures that refer to homosexuality in this paper, leaving the remaining three for next week.

Before we get to the specific Scripture texts, it's helpful to understand some significant contextual issues surrounding these passages. For instance, “*homosexuality*” was an

unknown word to the Old Testament writers and the apostle Paul. Harris and Moran write,

"Invented [in the nineteenth century] as a name for either a disease or a crime, [the word] 'homosexual' was [further adapted] when the twentieth century distinguished between sexual 'behavior' and sexual 'orientation.' The term homosexual remains ambiguous today. But when someone is said to be a 'homosexual,' the presumption is most likely to be that a person is homosexually oriented, whether or not this person has ever engaged in sexual relations with a member of the same sex."

--Maria Harris & Gabriel Moran, Homosexuality: A Word Not Written, in Homosexuality and Christian Faith, 1999, p. 74.

Anytime we overlay the meaning of modern words onto biblical texts, as some biblical translators have done with the word "*homosexual*," we must do so conservatively and with precision, recognizing that the assumptions we make may alter a text's meaning. The context in which the biblical authors wrote is often hard to discern, too, since we often must piece together a picture of life at that time from multiple historical sources. Our first two passages are examples of how locating other biblical references helps us interpret their meaning, possibly leading to different conclusions.

Genesis 19 and Jude 7 are passages about Sodom and Gomorrah, and what usually comes to mind about these two cities is condemnation for their sexual perversions. Homosexuality is assumed to be their sin because the Scripture reports male-on-male sexual interaction; however, these verses require a closer look.

Genesis 19:1-11

"The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. Then Lot saw them; he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.' They said, 'No; we will spend the night in the square.' But he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house, and he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house, and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' But they replied, 'Stand back!' And they said, 'This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man Lot and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands, brought Lot into the house

with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so they could not find the door.”
(Genesis 19:1-11, NRSVue, underlining mine)

Two messengers (*i.e.*, God’s angels) go to Sodom and Gomorrah to confirm the cities’ sinfulness ahead of God destroying them. Lot, Abraham’s nephew, allows them to stay at his house. That evening, the men of Sodom surround Lot’s house, demanding the messengers come outside. The men intend to gang-rape the messengers (“*so that we may know them*”)—a brutal practice among conquering forces where they used male-on-male sexual domination to humiliate their enemies. Lot curiously and shamefully offers his virgin daughters to the mob in place of the messengers with seemingly no judgment from God for his disgraceful proposal. This incident highlights the complexity of using an ancient text to determine what is and isn’t appropriate today. None of us would offer up our daughters as Lot did! So, the challenge is to find God’s eternal truth in this passage that applies to us today.

Understanding Genesis 19’s context puts this sexual perversion in a specific light. Therefore, one could argue this Scripture is not about adult partners in consenting same-sex relations; instead, it’s about sexual violence where conquerors subjugate their enemies through violent and debasing sexual acts. This perspective is “*one*” interpretation that you can evaluate for yourself.

As we dig deeper into the Bible and apply what we learn from other Scriptural texts referencing this encounter, we get an even bigger picture of God’s truth revealed in this story.

Jude 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.” (Jude 7, NRSVue)

Acknowledging the premise that Genesis 19 describes the intent of the men of Sodom to gang-rape their enemies, Jude’s reference to their sexual immorality most likely applies to their attempt to inflict sexual violence against God’s messengers. Other biblical references to Sodom and Gomorrah reinforce that their sinfulness is not homosexuality, as we understand it. For instance,

- Ezekiel 16:49-50 cites Sodom’s sin as pride and an unwillingness to share their prosperity with those in need. Ezekiel condemned Sodom for doing “*abominable things*,” a phrase that also applies to various violations of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-22). Other abominations include a man having sex with a woman during menstruation, failing to observe the Sabbath, disobeying one’s parents, or

mistreating an immigrant (*and in some respects, God's messengers were "immigrants" or "aliens," thus the men of Sodom's behavior was an abomination*).

- In Matthew 10:12-15, where Jesus sends his disciples out into the mission field, he instructs them to leave any city that fails to welcome them. Jesus says these inhospitable cities will suffer "*greater destruction*" than that of Sodom and Gomorrah. If Genesis 19 is a condemnation of all same-sex relations, as some argue, this interpretation begs the question of why Jesus pronounces more severe judgment against those who did not welcome his disciples than God pronounced against Sodom and Gomorrah.

Neither Ezekiel's account nor Jesus' words in Matthew identify homosexuality as the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. If one wants to argue the Bible is against homosexuality, these two passages are problematic in making the case. The other New Testament passages below offer more support for that perspective but also require some contextual analysis.

There are translation issues with the ancient texts in Paul's apparent references to homosexuality in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. There are two critical words in the Greek text that have enormous implications for the meaning of these texts. Even beyond these textual issues, the larger context of these passages demonstrates that Paul's main point was not about homosexuality but something else. Each Scripture has a distinctive emphasis apart from human sexuality.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

"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. 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."
(1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NIV)

The entirety of 1 Corinthians 6 is the larger context for these three verses in which Paul instructs the church to handle legal disputes within the faith community rather than sending matters to the civil authorities. In Richard Hays's commentary, he states,

"We should remember that Paul's present purpose in 1 Corinthians 6 is not to set up new rules for sexual behavior but to chastise the Corinthians for taking each other to court. All the items listed in verses 9-10 are merely illustrations of what the Corinthians 'used to be [like]' prior to their coming into the church. But a life-transforming change has occurred: 'you were washed, you were sanctified, and you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God' (v. 11). Considering this transformation, they ought to stop acting like "adikoi" [the Greek word translated as

"wrongdoers" in verse 9] by taking their property disputes into courts where the powerful take advantage of the less influential members of the community. Unless we keep this basic aim of the argument in view, our reading of this text will become severely out of focus."

--Richard B. Hays, First Corinthians, John Knox Press, 1997, p. 97

Paul emphasizes the mutuality that belongs to those whose righteousness is a gift from God in Jesus Christ because we're all different now from who we used to be. We all have a sinful past; however, through God's grace, we are equal, requiring that we settle our disputes as brothers and sisters in Christ. The underlying idea is that we would be more gracious to each other in handling any conflict. I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this passage because it sheds light on its key provisions:

"Don't you realize that this is not the way to live? Unjust people who don't care about God will not be joining in his kingdom. Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don't qualify as citizens in God's kingdom. A number of you know from experience what I'm talking about, for not so long ago, you were on that list. Since then, you've been cleaned up and given a fresh start by Jesus, our Master, our Messiah, and by our God present in us, the Spirit." (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, The Message Paraphrase)

There are two Greek words in 1 Corinthians 6 translated as "men." In Peterson's paraphrase, he takes gender out of it and offers the translation as "those who use and abuse sex." In the New International Version (NIV), where it says, "men who have sex with men," the first Greek word translated as "men" is "malakoi," and "arsenokoitai" is the second. The NIV footnote says these two words "refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts."

Both words are tricky to translate from Greek into English, so the NIV translators had to make some assumptions, as indicated in their footnotes. In the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue), "malakoi" is translated as "male prostitutes," and "arsenokoitai" is translated as "men who engage in illicit sex." Just as the NIV translators had to infer meaning from these words without comparative texts to help translate them, the NRSVue translators (and Petersen in his paraphrase, too) also had to make assumptions to put them into English. Steve Harper argues,

"When Paul arrived in Corinth, he encountered aberrant sexual behavior that had to be called out. His lists include two specific types [of aberrant sexual behavior]: addiction and abuse. Sexual addiction is seen through the Greek word 'malakoi,' and abuse is seen through the word 'arsenokoitai.'"

-- Steve Harper, Holy Love: A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality, Abingdon Press, 2019, p. 41

“Malakoi,” in the few occurrences we have for comparison with other ancient texts, is often translated as *“softness,”* which may explain why the NIV interprets it as the effeminate partner in a homosexual relationship. This description is *“one”* possible interpretation; however, it’s *“only”* an interpretation where the translators made some assumptions about the word’s meaning. Harper argues that it could also mean softness in terms of *“someone with soft boundaries,”* describing someone who can’t control their behavior – like an addict. This interpretation would fit with Peterson’s paraphrase of *“those who use and abuse sex.”*

The *“boundary-less-ness”* of *“malakoi”* is not limited to sexuality but also applies to other areas of life where addiction is present, such as eating disorders, gambling, and greed. Harper believes Paul was arguing against all uncontrolled and obsessive behavior – this would include sex addicts. Again, Harper’s translation is *“one”* possible interpretation; however, it’s *“only”* an interpretation and requires some assumptions on the translator’s part. After you consider the facts and weigh the evidence, you can decide what YOU believe is the most likely interpretation, recognizing that other faithful Christians may come to a different conclusion.

If only Paul had used more common words, we would better understand what he was saying. As you’ll see in a moment, it gets even more complicated with the second Greek word in these passages.

“Arsenokoitai” is only found in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy and nowhere else in ancient literature. Paul *“made up”* this word, and Harper thinks its meaning is more akin to the idea of *“abuse,”* arguing it describes behaviors that hurt us and others. It seems Peterson’s broad translation also supports this view. Regarding our sexuality, *“arsenokoitai”* is experienced as sexual exploitation, that is, any behavior where people treat other people like objects. Typical forms of exploitation in Greco-Roman culture included:

- Temple prostitution (*often involving young girls and boys without their consent*)
- Pederasty (*literally “love of boys,” a practice in which men had sex with young boys as part of a mentoring relationship, often arranged by the boy’s family*)
- Enslavers had sexual relations with their slaves (*where the enslaved people had no right to resist their masters*).

Like *“malakoi,”* *“arsenokoitai”* also describes behavior beyond sexuality, including thievery, betraying confidences, murder, paying unjust wages to workers, and oppressing the poor – all examples of exploitation of another.

Note: Where “arsenokoitai” applies to human sexuality, it includes any relationship where someone with power exploits another (i.e., pedophilia, rape, human trafficking, or any sexual contact with a vulnerable person, all of which occur among both heterosexual and homosexual populations.)

All the sins Paul lists fall into behaviors borne out of a lack of personal control or exploitative behaviors that seek to control others. So, the fact remains that Paul's primary point in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 is not specifically about same-sex relations; his overarching concern is how the "powerful" use the civil courts to take advantage of those with far less influence – a form of exploitation (see *Hays above*).

1 Timothy 1:8-11

"We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. 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, 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 Timothy 1:8-11, NIV)

This passage is about the law's role in the saving power of the Gospel. The focus is on the law as a catalyst for connecting us to God's grace. Thomas Oden wrote,

"[Quoting Martin Luther], 'The law has a double function: in an external way to repress violence and spiritually to reveal sins. It restrains the wicked to prevent their living according to their own flesh, and it shows the Pharisees their sins to keep them from pride.'

" [Oden adds], The law curbs only lawlessness, nothing else. As the surgeon is [of little] use to the healthy, the law is not urgently needed by those who already keep it through faith, active in love."

– Thomas C. Oden, First and Second Timothy and Titus, John Knox Press, 1989, p. 38-39.

The only power the law has over us is to convict us of our sins. The law cannot save us, so attempting to keep the law, thinking we are good enough to save ourselves, only leads to pride – the root of all sinfulness. When the law convicts us of our sins, and we turn to Jesus in our helplessness, his righteousness covers us, and we are saved by his grace – not by the law. The law is not irrelevant, but its only power is to turn us toward God, who alone can save us. Again, I turn to Peterson's paraphrase for clarity,

"It's true that moral guidance and counsel need to be given, but the way you say it and to whom you say it are as important as what you say. It's obvious, isn't it, that the law code isn't primarily for people who live responsibly, but for the irresponsible, who defy all authority, riding roughshod over God, life, sex, truth, whatever! They are cynical toward this great Message I've been put in charge of by this great God." (1 Timothy 1:8-11, The Message Paraphrase)

Peterson captures the larger context of this passage where he refers to people *“who defy all authority, riding roughshod over God, life, sex, truth, whatever!”* Bad people do many bad things, and apart from God’s grace, we’re all bad people, so let’s focus on the Good News we have in Jesus Christ. The law can’t save us – only God can!

Where the NIV translates *“arsenokoitai”* as *“homosexuality”* in 1 Timothy 1:10, Harper argues that the sins listed include those where powerful people exploit vulnerable persons. People who murder their aging parents, slave traders, liars, and perjurers are some of these lawless persons. The occurrence of *“arsenokoitai”* as a sexual reference could imply the same type of temple prostitution or pederasty noted above.

Yet, aside from those relationships that exploit or harm others, Harper suggests God honors mature, reciprocal relationships between two committed adults that are sacred, faithful, permanent, and monogamous (p. 42). Again, this is *“one”* interpretation; however, it’s *“only”* an interpretation that answers the question at the opening of this article. You get to decide what you believe about how best to interpret these passages.

Through these articles, I’m not asking anyone to abandon their convictions about what they believe the Bible says about same-sex relationships or homosexuality. I’m only asking us to respect each other’s perspective and talk things through so that when we’re searching for the *“right”* answer, we can maintain a *“right”* relationship with God and with each other. That is the essence of *“righteousness.”* If we respect one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and acknowledge that they, like we, have formulated their views with the guidance of the Holy Spirit through studying the Scriptures, we can remain in fellowship despite our differences. We don’t have to choose agreement over unity.

Next week, I’ll address the three remaining Scriptures that deal most directly with same-sex relations.