

St. John's Lutheran Church Winter Bible Study
"The Bible and Homosexuality"
Session One - Introduction

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

"Ground Rules for Conversation"

Outline and Bibliography

Defining Sexual Orientation

The APA (American Psychological Association) defines "sexual orientation" as

"...an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes... [that] ranges along a continuum, from exclusive attraction to the other sex to exclusive attraction to the same sex. However, sexual orientation is usually discussed in terms of three categories:" heterosexual, gay/lesbian [homosexual], and bisexual...

...sexual orientation is defined in terms of relationships with others...[it] is closely tied to the intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love, attachment, and intimacy. In addition to sexual behaviors, these bonds include nonsexual physical affection between partners, shared goals and values, mutual support, and ongoing commitment."

(<http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx>)

In a 2016 Gallup Poll, 4.1% of Adult Americans, approx 10 million people, identified as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender). (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/201731/lgbt-identification-rises.aspx>)

The 2015 Supreme Court Decision

On June 26, 2015, the United States Supreme Court held, "The Fourteenth Amendment requires a state to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex when their marriage was lawfully licensed and performed out-of-state." (<http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/obergefell-v-hodges/>)

The Fourteenth Amendment states: "...nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

Same-sex marriage became legal in the state of California following the California Supreme Court ruling “In re Marriage Cases” on May 15, 2008.

The ELCA Statement on Human Sexuality

St. John’s is a member of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).

At the Churchwide Assembly in August 2009, the ELCA adopted the social statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” (<http://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Human-Sexuality>), along with 15 implementing resolutions, which included:

Resolution 1: “Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”

Resolution 2: “Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”

Resolution 3: “Resolved, that in the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.”

The social statement allows for persons who are in a “publically accountable, lifelong, monogamous” same-sex relationship to be ordained, and to be in a covenanted relationship, in the ELCA – the same expectation for heterosexual persons.

The social statement affirms that sexual relations outside of a “publically accountable, lifelong, monogamous” relationship are sinful: “Promiscuity and sexual activity without a spirit of mutuality and commitment are sinful because of their destructive consequences for individuals, relationships, and the community.” (page 8)

The social statement recognizes that “on the basis of conscience bound belief”

- ~ some are “convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful”
- ~ some are convinced that “homosexual relationships reflect a broken world,” but may be “lived out with mutuality and care”
- ~ some are convinced that communities “are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability, but they do not equate these relationships with marriage”

~ some are convinced that “the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage.” (pages 20-21)

Christ & the Moral Vision of Scripture

The Word within the Word – what is the Bible?

“A cradle that holds the infant Jesus. Baby blankets that clothe the newborn Christ. Lutherans often use these well-known metaphors from Martin Luther to describe the Christian Scriptures and their importance. These simple metaphors clearly and profoundly describe both what the Scriptures are and what is their purpose. Simply stated, the Scriptures tell about Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to present Jesus to all who listen to or read them. That is why Lutheran Christians say that the Scriptures are the ‘source and norm’ of their teaching and practice. As the Gospel writer John wrote, ‘these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31).”

(<https://www.elca.org/en/Faith/ELCA-Teaching/Scripture-Creeds-Confessions>)

Scripture communicates the Gospel of Jesus Christ – it tells the story of God’s redemptive love throughout human history – it expresses the words of eternal and abundant life

Scripture communicates

- ~ God is a loving relationship of Three Persons – Father, Son, Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14)
- ~ God created the world and everyone in it (Gen 1)
- ~ God loves the world and everyone in it (1 John 4:10)
- ~ Jesus Christ came to save the world (John 3:16)
- ~ Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, lived, died on the cross, rose again to life, ascended into heaven, and will come again (Luke 24:46-47)
- ~ Jesus is the source of life now and forever, life abundant and eternal (John 11:25-26)
- ~ The Spirit is at work in this broken world and will one day restore creation (Rev 21:3-4)
- ~ We are saved by grace through faith in Christ (Eph 2:8-9)

Scripture is the living word speaking into our lives and transforming us – it tells us who God is and who we are – it shows us how to live.

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17)

Interpreting Scripture – how do we faithfully and fruitfully understand and enact the Bible?

A few principles (from a Lutheran Christian perspective)

- ~ Scripture is interpreted in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ
- ~ Scripture is interpreted *contextually* – seeking to understand the passage in its *literary* (what does it say?), *historical* (what did it say to those who first experienced it?), and *present* (what does it say to us?) context
- ~ Scripture is interpreted through *communal discernment for present application* – how do we understand biblical teaching on matters not explicitly addressed in Scripture? how does biblical teaching apply today?
- ~ Scripture is interpreted through *analogy* – how are situations today comparable to those in the biblical world?
- ~ Scripture is interpreted “in light of Scripture” – understanding individual passages of the Bible in terms of the whole biblical narrative
- ~ All Scripture is God’s Word, but some biblical points are more significant than others – Jesus spoke of the “Greatest” Commandments (*Matt 22:36-40, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:25-28*)
- ~ Scripture contains *law and gospel* – the law (including the OT law) maintains social order and convicts us of our sin – the gospel saves us

The Example of Christ – what would Jesus do?

“Jesus is Lord” (*Romans 10:9*)

Scripture affirms that Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God to us (*Col 1:15-19*), the Savior of the world (*Luke 2:10-11*), the Lord of all creation (*Phil 2:3-11*) – and is the embodiment of what is right and good and true (*John 14:6-7*), the authority, guide, and example for how we are to live in relationship with God and each other and the whole creation (*Hebrews 12:1-2*), the standard for Christian morality (*1 John 2:3-6*)

Christ calls us to follow him (*Luke 9:23*), learn from him (*Matt 11:29*), love others as he loves us (*John 15:12*) – he sends his followers into the world to share his good news (*Acts 1:8*) – in love (*John 3:16*), peace (*John 20:21*), joy (*John 15:11*)

Dallas Willard speaks of discipleship in terms of learning from Jesus “how to live our lives as he would live them if he were we” (page 58) – “If I am Jesus’ disciple that means *I am with him to learn from him how to be like him*” (page 276) – we are to have the mind and heart of Jesus Christ (Phil 2)

“God is love” (1 John 4:8)

Jesus was asked about the law; he said, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt 22:38-40)

Jesus said to his disciples, “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (John 13:34-35)

John wrote, “*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*” (1 John 4:7-11)

Paul wrote, “*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*” (1 Cor 13:4-8a, 13)

Love (agape)

~ “the quality of warm regard for and interest in another, *esteem, affection, regard, love*”

(BDAG, Greek Dictionary)

~ “something of the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all...It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing love; it’s what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives” of humans. (Martin Luther King, Jr., Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Nov 1957)

- ~ “Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”
(Martin Luther, The Heidelberg Disputation, note 28)

If love is the highest law, might sin be failure to love?

Sin (harmatia)

- ~ “to commit a wrong, to sin, to ‘miss the mark’ (BDAG, Greek Dictionary)
“But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 3:21-24)
- ~ human nature “curved in on itself” (*incurvatus in se*), seeking “all things, even God, for its own sake” (Luther, Lectures on Romans) – instead of being curved out to God and others
- ~ “ultimately, our human failure to live in community with God, each other, and the natural environment” (Grenz, page 187)

“The Weightier Matters of the Law” (Matt 23:23)

Jesus consistently showed compassion for those excluded by religious authorities because of perceived moral and/or social inferiority – the “sinners”

- ~ Jesus shared table fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 9:10-13, 11:19, Mark 2:15-17, Luke 5:30-32, 7:34, 15:1-2) – and called Matthew, a “tax collector,” to be one of his apostles (Matt 9:9)
- ~ Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-42), healed the son of the Roman soldier (John 4:46-54), healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28), forgave the “woman caught in adultery” (John 8:1-11), defended a woman called a “sinner” by a Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) ...

Jesus consistently spoke words of judgment against religious authorities who considered themselves morally and/or socially superior to others – the “[self] righteous”

- ~ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.” (Matt 23:23)

- ~ *“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”* (Mark 12:38-40)
- ~ *“Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.”* (Luke 11:46)
- ~ *“...are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the Sabbath? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.”* (John 7:23b-24) ...

Jesus did not specifically address homosexuality or same-sex relationships.

Essentials of the Faith – what is fundamental?

The Three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed) – accepted by the global Christian church for millennia as the foundational statements of faith – do not address homosexuality or even mention human sexuality – they confess faith in the Triune God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love” – Moravian Church motto

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Session Two – How the Church Changed

Questioning Culture

In considering the affirmation of publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships, two related questions frequently arise

- aren't we just following 'culture'?
- how can we change centuries of church teaching and tradition?

These questions assume...

- ~ The views of 'culture' are inherently morally wrong and the views of the church are inherently morally right
- ~ Listening to voices 'outside' of the church is wrong
- ~ Changing centuries of church tradition is wrong
- ~ The church is not *already* aligned with the prevalent culture in its understanding
- ~ The teachings and practices of the church have always and continue to align with the moral vision of the Bible

The Ongoing Work of the Holy Spirit

Jesus said to the crowds: "*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets* (Matt 7:12) – the Golden Rule

Jesus said to the disciples: "*So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*" (John 13:14-15)

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." (John 16:12-13)

Paul wrote to the church in Galatia: "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (Gal 3:28)

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love." (Gal 5:6)

Jew or Gentile – The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15)

Must Gentiles become Jews in order to be Christians?

According to Scripture and Tradition

- ~ The Jewish people were God’s chosen people (Gen 12:1-3, Gen 17:9-14, Exodus 19:3-8); the Gentiles were not
- ~ God’s election of the Jewish people was made evident in circumcision (Gen 17:9-14, Ex 12:43-50, Lev 12:3) and the law of Moses (Ex 19:3-8, Deut 26:16-19, Ps 1)
- ~ According to Scripture, God specifically commanded his people to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses
- ~ According to (approx 1500 years of) tradition, God’s chosen people are defined by circumcision and by the law of Moses

A compelling argument could be made from Scripture and tradition for ... yes.

The Movement of the Spirit

Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10)

The “law of Moses” included divisions between foods that could be eaten and foods that could not – “clean and unclean” (Lev 11) – *“But I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.”* (Lev 20:24-25)

- ~ Peter has a vision of “unclean” animals, is told by God to “kill and eat,” and when Peter refuses, God responds, “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (10:9-16) – God transforms Peter’s view of Scripture, *in Scripture*
- ~ Cornelius, a Gentile and a “devout man who feared God,” is told by God to send for Peter (10:1-8) – when Peter arrives and listens to the experience of Cornelius (10:17-33), he responds, *“I truly understand that God’s show no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* (10:34-35)
- ~ Peter shares the good news with them (10:36-43), the Holy Spirit falls on all who hear (10:44-46), Peter orders them to be “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” (10:47-48)

The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15)

- ~ Peter testifies (15:7-11)
- ~ Paul and Barnabas testify (15:12)
- ~ James interprets Scripture in their present context (Act 15:13-21; Amos 9:11-12)

The Council decides – ***Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to be Christians.***

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” (15:28-29)

In light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, the early church expanded the definition of God’s chosen people.

Regarding the ‘issue’ of Gentiles, the early church...

- ~ Interpreted Scripture in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- ~ Followed the moral vision of Scripture in reforming centuries of tradition
- ~ Listened to the experience of those who had previously been excluded from the definition of God’s chosen people
- ~ Followed the work of the Holy Spirit in setting aside the letter of the law

How might this apply to the ‘issue’ of homosexuality in the church today?

Slave or Free – The Institution of Slavery in Church and State

Slavery in Biblical Interpretations

- ~ No passage in the Bible explicitly condemns the institution of slavery
- ~ Several passages in the Bible implicitly condone the institution of slavery
- ~ Difficult to argue against slavery from a ‘literal’ interpretation of the Bible

Many Christians in the U.S. used the Bible to justify the institution of slavery, stating:

- › Africans (and other indigenous peoples) are the descendants of Ham and therefore cursed to be slaves – though Scripture nowhere states this connection
- ~ Noah becomes drunk; his son Ham, “the father of Canaan,” sees Noah’s nakedness; Noah wakes up, says, “*Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers. He also said, “Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.” (Gen 9:20-27)*

- › Slavery is an accepted practice in the Old Testament and is therefore morally acceptable today. For example:
 - ~ Abraham (Gen 12:16, 39:17), Isaac (Gen 26:19, 25), and Jacob (Gen 32:5, 17) owned slaves
 - ~ The Commandment regarding Sabbath includes rest for “male and female slaves” (Ex 20:10, Ex 23:12, Deut 5:14)
 - ~ Joshua made slaves of the Canaanites not killed in the Conquest (Josh 9:23)
 - ~ Levitical law states Israelites may acquire slaves from the surrounding nations (Lev 25:44), and the law establishes stipulations for slavery (Ex 21:1-27, Lev 25:38-55, Deut 15:11-18)

- › Slavery is an accepted practice in the New Testament and is therefore morally acceptable today. For example:
 - ~ “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ.” (Eph 6:5)
 - ~ “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.” (Col 3:22)
 - ~ “Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed.” (1 Tim 6:1)
 - ~ “But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine...Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.” (Titus 2:1, 9)
 - ~ “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.” (1 Peter 2:18)

In the Civil War era, Christians justified slavery with biblical arguments. For example:

Thomas Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (1850)

- ~ “And if the modern views of abolitionists be correct, we may expect to find the institution marked with such tokens of divine displeasure, as will throw all other sins into the shade, as comparatively small, when laid by the side of this monster.”
- ~ “Now, to suppose that Jesus Christ left his disciples to find out, without a revelation, that slavery must be abolished” in light of commandment to love each other, assumes “that they would be able to spy out a discrepancy in the law of Moses, which God himself never saw.”
- ~ Attempts have been “made to force political slavery upon us in the place of domestic, by strangers who have no right to meddle with our matters.”

James Henley Thornwell (quoted in Rogers, pages 20-22)

- ~ Concedes that the “laws of love, and the condemnation of tyranny and oppression,” seem logically to condemn slavery, but Scripture treats slavery lawfully, and Scripture does not contradict itself, so “slavery is, by necessary implication, excepted.”
- ~ Employs a ‘natural law’ argument: “Whatever is universal is natural. We are willing that slavery should be tried by this standard.”

These arguments posit

- ~ ‘Modern’ abolition stands against Scripture and tradition
- ~ If abolition was right, Jesus would have said so
- ~ People have a religious right to their social views regarding slavery
- ~ Scriptures’ “law of love” does not override Scriptures’ approval of slavery
- ~ Slavery is natural and right because it is ‘universally’ accepted

Thanks be to God, Christians did argue against slavery from a biblical foundation centering in the words and example of Christ and the moral vision of Scripture

“The Bible’s moral principles argued against the social practices to be found within the Bible.”

(Gomes, pages 93-95)

- ~ Bishop Bartoleme de Las Casas stated (in 1550) that the biblical texts used to justify slavery were historically conditioned and overruled by the biblical principles of love and charity; the Bible cannot “be used to justify actions contrary to the moral law of Christ.”
- ~ John Wesley stated that slavery was inconsistent with the “New Testament’s paramount teachings on spiritual rebirth, sanctification, and evangelism.”
- ~ Quaker John Woolman stated that slavery was inconsistent with New Testament principles, based partly on the *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats* (Matt 25:31-46).
- ~ David Walker, an African American writing in 1829, based his argument against slavery on Peter’s statement in Acts 10:34.
- ~ Abolitionist John Rankin stated, “The whole Bible is opposed to slavery. The sacred volume is one grand scheme of benevolence. Beams of love and mercy emanate from every page, while the voice of justice denounces the oppressor.” (Rogers, 32)

Slavery is a powerful example of minds and hearts being changed while the biblical text did not:

“No one in contemporary America, except perhaps the most hard-bitten white supremacist, would read scripture with regard to race in the same way as the Southern Baptists read it a century ago...and no one feels that some travesty of scriptural integrity has happened because of that fact...It is not scripture that has changed, but rather the moral imagination by which we see ourselves, and see and read scripture.” (Gomes, 99)

How might this apply to the ‘issue’ of homosexuality in the church today?

St. John's Lutheran Church Winter Bible Study
"The Bible and Homosexuality"
Session Three – Sodom and Gomorrah

The Story of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-11) & the Story of Gibeah (Judges 19:16-30)

These stories are remarkably similar

- ~ visitors to a city are offered hospitality by a 'foreigner' (Gen 19:1-3, Judges 19:16-21)
- ~ the "men of the city" surround the house and demand to "know" [have intercourse with] the host's male guest(s) (Gen 19:4-5, Judges 19:22)
- ~ the hosts says, "do not act so wickedly," and seeks to protect his male guest(s) by offering the mob his own virgin daughter(s) (Gen 19:6-8, Judges 19:23-24)
- ~ in Gibeah, the Levite throws his concubine out to the mob, they abuse her, and she dies (Judges 19:25-30); in Sodom, the male guests, who are angels (Gen 19:1), rescue Lot and his family from the mob (Gen 19:9-11)
- ~ Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed (Gen 19:12-29); the Benjaminites and Israelites go to war, with thousands of casualties (Judges 20-21)

The sexual violation in these stories is rape (or attempted rape), not homosexuality

- ~ the "men of the city" are (likely heterosexual) men seeking to subjugate and humiliate strangers in their town – men seeking to dominate men (and women) through sexual violence
- ~ if these "men of the city" are homosexual, why would the hosts offer them women?
- ~ if "all the people to the last man" (19:4) in Sodom are homosexual, does that mean there were no heterosexual men in Sodom?
- ~ while utterly reprehensible behavior to us today, the hosts offered their daughter(s) and/or concubine to the mob because in a patriarchal society, "men held greater worth, and thus their violation was viewed as a greater offense than violating a woman" (Gushee, page 62)
- ~ the "men of the city" demonstrate a shocking violation of the sacrosanct value of hospitality in ancient Near Eastern culture
- ~ "The stories speak only to the sin of homosexual rape and say nothing at all about consensual relationships between persons of the same sex" (Powell, page 23)

The Sins of Sodom and Gomorrah

Throughout Scripture, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are never spoken of as same-sex interest or behavior, but rather idolatry, injustice, inhospitality.

- ~ “Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!...learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Isaiah 1:10, 17, also 3:9, 15)
- ~ “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 of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah. (Jeremiah 23:14)
- ~ “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; therefore I removed them when I saw it.” (Ezekiel 16:49-50, also 16:59)
- ~ Jesus said to the disciples, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.” (Matt 10:11-15, also Luke 10:8-12)
- ~ Other verses (e.g., Gen 18:30, Deut 29:23, Rom 9:29) do not indicate a specific sin.

According to the biblical narrative, the sins of Sodom & Gomorrah are not homosexuality or same-sex relations. Why not affirm that these passages are an indictment against sexual violence and do not address publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?

Jude 1:7 & 2 Peter 2:6

Two passages in the New Testament conflate the story of Sodom and Gomorrah – where the visitors the men attempt to rape are “angels” (Gen 19:1) – with the story of when “the sons of God [angels] went in to the daughter of humans” and had children (Gen 6:1-4), after which the Lord “saw the wickedness of humankind” and brought the Flood (Gen 6:5-8:22):

“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 1:7)

“...and if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly.” (2 Peter 2:6)

Jude places this in the context of “angels who did not keep their own position” (1:6) and Peter places this in the context of “God did not spare the angels when they sinned” (2:4) – *the textual context indicates the “sexual immorality” and “unnatural lust” Jude mentions is sexual intercourse between humans and angels, not between two humans of the same sex.*

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Session Four – Holiness Codes and Vice Lists

Holiness Code in Ancient Israel

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

"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." (Lev 20:13)

These verses are part of the *Holiness Code* found in Leviticus, chapters 17-26

- ~ the guiding principle in Leviticus is God's command: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2) – "holy" (Hebrew, *kadosh*) means "separate, apart, sacred" (BDB, Hebrew Dictionary)
- ~ the commands of the Holiness Code were given to the people of Israel as they prepared to enter the Holy Land, and were "designed to provide a standard of moral behavior" that would distinguish them from the Canaanites and other surrounding nations (Gomes, page 153):
"You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out. You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples." (Lev 20:22-24)
- ~ the Holiness Code defined the "religious, civic, and cultural identity" of the people of Israel (Rogers, page 71) – it fostered the faithfulness, integrity, and growth of the community – it was given to a particular people in a particular time and place for a particular purpose

The Holiness Code defines "holiness" primarily in terms of ritual purity

- ~ faithfulness to God – including proper worship (e.g., Lev 21-22)
- ~ no 'mixing' with people of other nations – including no intermarriage (e.g., Deut 7:1-4)
- ~ maintaining a strict social hierarchy – including male gender superiority (e.g., Lev 20) (Rogers, page 72; also Gushee, page 67; Nissinen, pages 42-43)

Maintaining Gender Status

The APA (American Psychological Association) defines “gender” as

“the condition of being male, female, or neuter. In a human context, the distinction between gender and sex reflects the usage of these terms: Sex usually refers to the biological aspects of maleness or femaleness, whereas gender implies the psychological, behavioral, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female (i.e., masculinity or femininity)

(<https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf>)

The language of these verses suggests that the prohibition is primarily about maintaining the gender status of men in the society:

“You shall not lie with a male *as with a woman...*”;

“If a man lies with a male *as with a woman...*”

- ~ The primary concern indicated is a man being ‘as a woman’ in sexual relationships – same-sex male acts were an offense to the status of the male
- ~ There is no prohibition against lesbianism in the Old Testament
- ~ *If* the primary concern were same-sex relations and not gender roles, *then* wouldn’t these verses state: “a man shall not lie with a man and a woman shall not lie with a woman”

Defining “Abomination”

“...it is an *abomination.*” (Lev 18:22)

“...both of them have committed an *abomination...*” (Lev 20:13)

Variations of the Hebrew word “*toevah*” (*abomination*) – “of physical repugnance to God and his people” (BDB, Hebrew Dictionary) – are used *117 times* in the Old Testament, especially in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, and Proverbs (Gushee, page 64) – for example

- ~ “You shall not eat any *abhorrent* thing” – including pork, rabbit, shellfish (Deut 14:3-21, Lev 20:25, Lev 11)
- ~ “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an *abomination* to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.” (Prov 6:16-19)
- ~ “If he has a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though his father does none of them), who eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor's wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits *abomination*, takes advance or accrued interest; shall he then live? He

shall not. He has done all these *abominable* things; he shall surely die; *his blood shall be upon himself.*” (Ezek 18:10-13)

The Holiness Code is composed of numerous commandments – for example

- ~ “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” (Lev 19:17)
- ~ “You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God.” (Lev 19:2)
- ~ “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” (Lev 19:19)

The Holiness Code calls for the death penalty in numerous cases – for example

- ~ “All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, *their blood is upon them.*” (Lev 20:9, also Deut 21:18-21)
- ~ “A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, *their blood is upon them.*” (Lev 20:27)
- ~ “Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands on his head, and let the whole congregation stone him.” (Lev 24:14)

From the days of the Early Church, Christians have made distinctions between those commandments of the Holiness Code that apply to Christian morality and those that do not – “While the material cannot simply be dismissed, the Christian Church has consistently taught that the Holiness Code is not determinative for Christian behavior or ethics.” (Powell, page 24)

Setting Aside the Holiness Code

Jesus Christ is determinative for Christian behavior and ethics.

Jesus shifted the understanding and practice of “Holiness” from external codes and hierarchical social structures to internal motivations and loving relationships.

- ~ On eating with “unclean” hands – “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:18-23, also Matt 15:1-20, Luke 11:37-41)

- ~ In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) – “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (5:8) – and his words on authentically keeping God’s commandments (5:17-48)
- ~ On ‘breaking’ the Sabbath – “Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’” (Mark 2:27-28, also Matt 12:1-14, Luke 6:1-11, John 5:1-18, 7:23-24)
- ~ Jesus said to his disciples, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:42-43, also Matt 20:25-27, Luke 22:25-27, John 13:1-20) ...

Peter, Paul and Barnabas, James, and the members of Early Church followed the example of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit at the Council of Jerusalem in setting aside the Holiness Code and welcoming Gentiles into the Church (Acts 15). (*See notes from session two.*)

The Levitical prohibition against same-sex relations between men is part of a Holiness Code that contemporary Christians affirm, in both doctrine and practice, is no longer binding for Christian ethics or moral behavior. Why not set aside the Holiness Code in affirming publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?

Vice Lists in Paul’s Letters

“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes [Greek, *arsenokoitai*] sodomites [Greek, *malakoi*] thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

“This means understanding that 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 [Greek, *malakoi*], 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.” (1 Timothy 1:9-11)

In these passages, Paul employs *vice lists*

- ~ lists of vices and virtues used as a rhetorical strategy in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature for moral education
- ~ also found in Rom 1:29-31, Gal 5:19-23, and 2 Tim 3:1-5 – which “seem to reflect general concerns of Hellenistic Jews about the deplorable state of Greek society” (Rogers, page 73)
- ~ vice lists are summaries, “rarely referring to the actual contexts of the vices or to the real people to whom the text is directed” (Nissinen, page 113)

- ~ the word “fornication” – Greek *porneia*, “unlawful sexual intercourse” (BDAG, Greek Dictionary) – is understood to refer to any sexual relationship outside of marriage

Two Ambiguous Words

Two words used in these *two verses* (1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10), with the *two verses* Rom 1:26-27, constitute the primary New Testament texts historically used to affirm “homosexuality is a sin.” The meaning of these two words – *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* – is highly contested.

- > The word *malakoi* means –1) pertaining to being yielding to touch, *soft*; 2. pertaining to being passive in a same-sex relationship, *effeminate* (BDAG, Greek Dictionary)
 - ~ the only other use in the New Testament describes *soft* clothes (Matt 11:8, Luke 7:25)
 - ~ in Greco-Roman sources, *malakoi* is used to speak of “frailty of body or character, illness, sentimentality, or moral weakness” (Nissinen, page 118) – it might refer to a man who is *effeminate*, “which in that culture was treated as a moral failing” (Rogers, page 74) – it might refer to the “passive partner in a pederastic relationship” or a “male prostitute” (Nissinen, page 117)
 - ~ *malakoi* has been translated in the New Testament as (biblegateway.com): “effeminate” (KJV, NAS), “male prostitutes” (NRSV, NLT), “sodomites” (RSV), “homosexuals” (LB), “those practicing homosexuality” (NIV), “sexually uncontrolled or perverted” (Phillips) – this variety demonstrates the uncertain meaning of the word
- > The word *arsenokoitai* means “a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex, *pederast*” (BDAG, Greek Dictionary) – though this definition is debated
 - ~ scholars believed Paul coined this phrase – this seems to be the first time *arsenokoitai* is used in either Greco-Roman or Jewish texts (Nissinen, page 115)
 - ~ a composite of *arseno*+*koitai* (“man”+“bed” – “bed” referring to a sexual act) – and may be derived from the Holiness Code, “lies with a male” (Lev 20:13) is *arsenos koiten* in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) (Nissinen, page 114)
 - ~ while the word indicates same-sex activity between men – there is no mention of same-sex activity between women in these discussions – there is no interpretive consensus as to *what* sexual activity Paul means
 - ~ Dale Martin suggests the use of the term in later Greek literature refers to “forced prostitution” (Gushee, page 78)
 - ~ James Brownson suggests the vice list refers to sexual trafficking (Gushee, page 79)

- ~ Robin Scroggs suggests the term refers to pederasty (Nissinen, page 116)
- ~ *arsenokoitai* has been translated in the New Testament as (biblegateway.com): “homosexual offenders” (NIV), “practice homosexuality” (NLT), “male prostitutes” (NRSV), “both participants in same-sex intercourse” (CEB, including *malakoi*), “abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV) – this variety demonstrates the uncertain meaning of the word

It is fair to state that Paul has only negative things to say about same-sex conduct as he perceived it, “yet it would be hazardous to make Paul’s text address something it does not address. It is not fair to claim Paul would condemn all homosexual activity everywhere, always, and in all forms. Paul’s arguments are based on certain Hellenistic moral codes that are culture specific and that have their own trajectory in tradition.” (Nissinen, page 124)

“Condemnation of a certain kind of homosexuality in a particular context does not imply a necessary rejection of every expression of homosexuality in every context – nor does a general repudiation of homosexual acts preclude the possibility of exceptions” (Powell, page 26) – in other words, to state that sexual abuse (rape, promiscuity, prostitution, adultery) between people of the opposite sex is wrong, is not to state that heterosexuality or heterosexual relationships are wrong – why not apply this same standard to homosexuality and homosexual relationships?

The uncertainty of the meaning of these two words in Paul’s letters makes it difficult to rest a moral position regarding homosexuality on them. Why not affirm that Paul is not addressing publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships in these “vice lists”?

St. John's Lutheran Church Winter Bible Study
"The Bible and Homosexuality"
Session Five – Creation and Marriage

"In the beginning, God created..." (Gen 1:1)

The Creation Accounts (Gen 1:1-2:4 & 2:5-25) are part of the *primeval history* or *pre-history* presented in Genesis 1-11 (Boadt, page 110)

- ~ Genesis 1-11 recounts what took place *before the history of Israel* – before God's call of Abraham & Sarah (Gen 12) and the beginnings of the nation of Israel (ca 2100 BC)
- ~ tradition holds the Pentateuch (first five books of OT) was written by Moses (ca 1400s BC) – oral tradition written down at least centuries later
- ~ these stories reflect back on the history of humanity in general and Israel in particular – and may therefore be considered *descriptive* – explaining how things are – as well as *prescriptive* – dictating how things should be (Boadt, page 130)
- ~ the Genesis creation accounts declare there is one God, who is wise and benevolent, who intentionally made "the heavens and the earth" in goodness and beauty, who created human beings in God's image to share in God's divine gifts
 - *in direct contrast to* the creation stories of the cultures around Israel at the time (e.g., Babylon's *Enuma Elish*, ca 1700 BC), which spoke of many gods, who were volatile and violent, who accidently made the heavens and earth as they battled against each other, and who considered humans disposable slaves
- ~ God made us to be in loving relationship with God and each other
- ~ Genesis 1-11 declares God's *steadfast* love (Ex 34:6-7, Num 14:18, Deut 5:9-10) for his creation, in stories that present a pattern of 'creation, fall, redemption;' God creates, humans fall, God redeems
- ~ the Genesis creation accounts do not specifically address homosexuality or same-sex relationships

Based on these Genesis texts, opponents of same-sex relationships assert that homosexuality is not what God intended in creation, and is therefore a sin, because

- ~ male and female anatomies 'fit together,' while homosexual unions do not
 - God created "male and female"
- ~ marriage is between one man and one woman
 - husband and wife become "one flesh"
- ~ heterosexual unions produce children and homosexual unions do not
 - God said "be fruitful and multiply"

While the Genesis creation accounts indicate that the primary pattern for human sexual relationship is between a male and a female (Gen 1:27) who unite physically (Gen 2:24) for the purposes of procreation (Gen 1:28), productive work (Gen 1:28), companionship (Gen 2:18), and family structure (Gen 2:24) – this does not necessarily mean that all departures from this pattern are unnatural and/or immoral.

“Male and Female”

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:27)

The creation accounts offer a *descriptive* explanation of human origins – where do we come from? – the answer is “from the union of a man and a woman. That biological fact is attended by the cultural assumptions of the world in which the writers lived.” (Gorman, page 150)

~ does anatomical compatibility between men and women establish the moral superiority of heterosexual relationships over homosexual relationships

The creation accounts do not offer a *prescriptive* prohibition against same-sex relationships – while “heterosexuality” is assumed, “homosexuality” is not addressed

~ does it follow that because heterosexuality is the dominant sexuality, it is the only morally acceptable sexuality

The creation accounts demonstrate the diversity in God’s good creation – and Lutheran theology affirms that God continues to create – in the past, God created (*creatio ex nihilo*) – in the present, God continues to create (*creatio continua*) and invites us to participate in his productive work – in the future, God will make creation new – “For believers, it is hope in God’s future, not in an idealized past, that inspires participation in God’s changing, open, and inexhaustible creation.” (ELCA Human Sexuality Social Statement, pages 5-6)

~ might heterosexuality and homosexuality be part of the diversity of God’s creation

Gen 3 describes the human fall into sin – a biblical text that indicates “*everyone’s* sexuality is sinful, broken, and disordered, just like everything else about us. Nobody has Genesis 1-2 sexuality...Everyone’s sexuality needs to be morally disciplined and ordered.” (Gushee, page 97)

~ might the same standards of sexual morality be applied to homosexuals and heterosexuals

“One Flesh”

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” (Gen 2:24)

The creation account in Gen 1 – in which God says to the “male” and “female” (Hebrew, *zachar* and *nekeva*), “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:27-28) – does not refer to “marriage” and does not use the Hebrew terms for “husband” and “wife”

The creation account in Gen 2 offers a *descriptive* explanation of marital relations between a “husband” and “wife” (Hebrew, *ish* and *isha*) (Gen 2:23-24) in the context of its composition, and not necessarily a *prescriptive* directive for the relations of all men and all women for all time in all places

The creation account in Gen 2 describes

- ~ how God made “a woman” (*isha*) from a rib of “the man” (Hebrew, *adam*), and “the man” declared, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...” (Gen 2:21-23)
- ~ “Therefore a man...” (Gen 2:24), Hebrew *al-ken*, “thus upon,” “hence on the ground of, so” (BDB, Hebrew Dictionary) – the text does not read, ‘Therefore a man *must...*’ or ‘Therefore a man *should...*’ – an explanation, not a command

“The creation story is the basis and not the end of human diversity, and thus to regard it as excluding everything it does not mention is to place too great a burden on the text and its writers.” (Gorman, page 150)

- ~ while the creation accounts affirm the morality of heterosexual marriage, they do not address the morality of all human sexuality – including publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships

“Be Fruitful and Multiply”

“God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’” (Gen 1:28)

In contrast to the *explanation* for heterosexual marriage (Gen 2:24), this presents a *commandment* by God to procreate – “God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’”

- ~ and yet Scripture does not morally condemn a sexual relationship only because it fails to produce children

If the only moral imperative for marriage is procreation – in other words, the only reason to get married is to have children – and procreation makes heterosexual marriage a moral imperative – in other words, celibacy is not an acceptable option – then

– persons who cannot have or do not want children should not get married

~ this is not biblical and not compassionate

– unmarried persons are morally inferior

~ Jesus Christ was unmarried

~ along with the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 7:8), Mother Theresa, St. Francis, Pope Francis...

As with the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) that promotes procreative sexual behavior, these creation accounts were given to a particular people in a particular time and particular place – they affirm that marriage is good because it produces children, and they affirm there are other moral reasons to marry – companionship, productive work, family structure...

~ might these also be moral reasons for publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships

Paul on “One Flesh”

In 1 Corinthians (6:16) and Ephesians (5:31), Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, “...the two will become one flesh.”

~ In 1 Corinthians (6:15-20), Paul is speaking specifically about “prostitution” and “fornication” and not specifically about same-sex relationships

~ In Ephesians (5:21-33), Paul is speaking specifically about the relationships of husbands and wives, as a metaphor for Christ and the church, and not specifically about same-sex relationships

Jesus on Marriage and Divorce Mark 10:2-12 (Matt 19:3-9, Luke 16:18)

A Question on Divorce

The Gospel of Mark (and a parallel passage in Matthew) presents an encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees in which they “test him” by asking the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (10:2)

Jesus asks what Moses commanded (10:3), and they reply “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” (10:4)

- ~ The Greek word for “certificate of dismissal,” *apostasiou*, indicates “in the sense of relinquishment of property after sale, abandonment, etc.” (BDAG, Greek Dictionary)
- ~ The “law of Moses” (Deut 24:1) states, “*Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house...*”

Jesus replies, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘*God made them male and female.*’ [Gen 1:27] ‘*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*’ [Gen 2:24] So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (10:5-9)

- ~ Jesus indicates this commandment was given by Moses to persons set in their moral failure – perhaps *because* men were simply divorcing their wives for no reason, Moses formalized a process in which they had to give some reason
- ~ in the patriarchal culture of the time, when women (generally) had no independent sources of income, divorce and the subsequent lack of male financial and social support could have devastating consequences
- ~ Jesus quotes the Genesis creation accounts specifically to counter the sinful practice of men arbitrarily divorcing their wives

In these passages, Jesus is addressing heterosexual marriage and divorce, he is not addressing same-sex relationships.

Divorce and Remarriage

In Mark, Jesus continues, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” (10:11-12, also Luke 16:18) – Jesus makes *no exceptions here* that allow divorce and remarriage. In Matthew, Jesus adds, “except for unchastity” [Greek, *porneia*] (Matt 19:9)

Yet, the ELCA “recognizes that in some situations the trust upon which marriage is built becomes so deeply damaged or is so deeply flawed that the marriage itself must come to a legal end (Matthew 19:3–12). This church does not treat divorce lightly nor does it disregard the

responsibilities of marriage. However, in such situations, it provides support to the people involved and all who are affected...Further, it believes that those who wish to remarry may gain wisdom from the past and may be assured of the Gospel's freedom, in the midst of brokenness and forgiveness, to enter into their new responsibilities in joy and hope." (ELCA Human Sexuality Social Statement, 17)

Regarding the issue Jesus specifically addresses in these passages, for valid biblical and moral reasons, the church has made exceptions to the letter of the law in the Spirit of love.

St. John's Lutheran Church Winter Bible Study
"The Bible and Homosexuality"
Session Six – Nature and Choice

Is Sexual Orientation a Choice?

"Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation." (APA – <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx>)

Even researchers who take a conservative view of the data and support the traditional position on homosexual conduct "agree that there is a percentage of people for whom homosexual orientation is not a matter of choice." (ELCA Journeying Together, page 28)

"Reparative therapy and sexual orientation conversion therapy...have serious potential to harm young people because they present the view that the sexual orientation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth is a mental illness or disorder, and they often frame the inability to change one's sexual orientation as a personal and moral failure." (American Psychological Association – <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.aspx>)

In 2013, Alan Chambers, the leader of Exodus International, a Christian "reparative therapy" organization that operated for nearly forty years, closed the organization, stated "99.9% of the people they had tried to help had not experienced a change in their sexual orientation," and apologized for promoting sexual reorientation efforts (Gushee, page 26 – <http://alanchambers.org/>)

There is a lack of compelling evidence to suggest that human sexual orientation is simply a matter of choice.

Paul on Natural and Unnatural

"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." (Rom 1:26-27)

Paul's Letter to the Romans

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome (ca 54 AD) to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and as he planned to visit them (Rom 15:14-33)

The church was composed of both Gentile and Jewish Christians – and may have been established by believers who heard the good news at Pentecost (Acts 2:10)

It is (arguably) the most systematic presentation of Christian faith among Paul's letter

- ~ Paul states the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...” (Rom 1:16-17) – the passage Martin Luther was studying when he had his ‘tower experience’
- ~ Paul continues – humans have all sinned (1:18-3:20), and are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (3:21-5:11), and sanctified by the Spirit (5:12-8:39) – Jews and Gentiles (9:1-11:36) – to live in love (12:1-15:13)

It is in the context of his argument in Romans 1-3 that Paul writes “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” (1:26-27).

Is Paul Condemning “Homosexuality”?

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul argues

- ~ that even those without the *special revelation* of God given in Scripture (i.e. Gentiles) have been given the *general revelation* of God given in nature – and are therefore “without excuse” (1:20) in not worshipping God – they “exchanged” (Greek, *allasso*) the “glory of the immortal God” for images of humans and animals (1:23), they “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25)
- ~ for this idolatry, “God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged [Greek, *metellaxan*] natural intercourse for unnatural” as did “the men,” who committed “shameful acts with men” (1:26-27)
 - while this implies same-sex relations between women, it does not state the “unnatural intercourse” in which the women engaged
 - they “received in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (1:27) – ‘exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural intercourse’ *was itself* the penalty for ‘exchanging worship of God for worship of idols’ (Radmacher, page 789)

~ for this idolatry, Paul continues, “God gave them up to a debased mind and things that should not be done” (1:28) – a ‘vice list’ that includes “...envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (1:29-31)

Paul is reflecting a particularly Jewish argument against particularly Gentile vices – ‘impure, degrading, shameless, debased’ acts that violate the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26), “according to which sexual vices in particular were characteristic of the Gentiles and linked with idolatry” (Nissinen, page 106)

Paul’s condemnation of women and men “exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural” intercourse (1:26-27) makes sense only if Paul is referring to *heterosexuality* and not *homosexuality* as a constitutional orientation

~ same-sex behavior is not ‘unnatural’ for those who are ‘naturally’ homosexual

~ same-sex behavior is ‘unnatural’ for those who are ‘naturally’ heterosexual

Might Paul be condemning the conduct not of homosexual people, but rather of heterosexual people engaging in same-sex acts (Gorman, page 157, Gushee, page 87, Nissinen, page 109)

And, given that same-sex acts in the Gentile (Greco-Roman) world at that time were predominately committed by heterosexual men engaged in abusive behaviors, might Paul be condemning these specific types of behaviors between two people of the same sex and not same-sex relationships in general

How Does Paul Define “Unnatural”?

In Rom 1-3, Paul does not define “natural” (Greek, *physis*) and “unnatural” (Greek, *para physin*) in terms of the creation accounts or the law of Moses – Gentiles did not have the Hebrew Scriptures – but the “law of nature” through which God the Creator revealed himself to the Gentiles (1:20) – the ‘common order of things’ as understood in daily life

In this context, Paul uses “natural” (*physis*) as it was understood in antiquity, “(*physis*) expresses a fundamental cultural role or conventional, proper, or inborn character or appearance, or the true being of a person or a thing rather than ‘nature’ in a genetic-biological sense, as a modern reader would perceive it.” (Nissinen, page 105)

Thus, for Paul “unnatural is a synonym for unconventional” (Rogers, page 77) – which does not necessarily mean “immoral”

- ~ In Rom 11:24, Paul states that God acted “contrary to nature” (*para physis*) by grafting the Gentiles into the tree of God’s people – he is stating God acted unconventionally, not immorally
- ~ In 1 Cor 11:14-15, Paul states, “Does not *nature (physis)* itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is *degrading* to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her *glory*?” – is an unconventional hairstyle immoral?

Paul indicates that same-sex relationships are immoral because they are unnatural, by which he means – given his use of the term “natural” in other contexts – they violate the conventional understanding of sexual relations in his cultural context – is Paul’s conventional understanding of sexual relationships in his context morally binding in all contexts?

Paul’s argument in Romans 1-3 indicates that he assumes a heterosexual orientation is “natural,” and therefore same-sex behavior is “unnatural,” and is therefore indicative of the vices of the Gentile world. Why not affirm that Paul is not addressing publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships in this passage?

Celibacy is not a Mandate

While some opponents of same-sex relationships acknowledge that homosexuality is not a choice, they assert the only way for homosexual persons to avoid sin is to remain celibate for life

This mandate for ‘forced’ celibacy is not biblically grounded...

- ~ The Genesis creation accounts affirm that “it is not good” to be alone without a life partner (Gen 2:18) – and there are many good reasons to be married
- ~ Jesus (Matt 19:11-12) and Paul (1 Cor 7:7-9) both indicate that celibacy is a gift for those who are called to it in service to God, but not a requirement for those who are not called to it
- ~ While assuming heterosexual marriage, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confessional*, a primary confessional document for Lutherans, devotes an entire section arguing against “the law concerning celibacy” of priests (Article XXIII)

...and it is not compassionate.

an excerpt from Matthew Vine’s testimony (<http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript/>)

Justified by Grace through Faith

Paul's argument in Rom 1-3 builds to the point where he declares, "...*For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" (Rom 3:23-24)

This is the good news we are called to share as followers and as the community of Christ – we are loved by the God who made us and who came to save us and who will one day make us whole – God who has called us to love one another – later in Romans, Paul writes, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." (Rom 13:10)

Professor Jack Rogers shares, In 1999, professor Lewis Smedes, "recalling a line from an old hymn, 'There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea,' argued that the church should accept people who are homosexuals as full members. His last line was, 'I think I know my own heart well enough to believe that if [God's] mercy is wide enough for me, it is wide enough for them'... When we realize how gracious God has been to us, we cannot deny God's grace to others." (Rogers, page 107)