



**API EQUALITY-LA**  
Asians and Pacific Islanders for LGBT Equality

## Christianity and Homosexuality: What Does the Bible Say?

Throughout the Bible, homosexuality is mentioned rarely. Jesus never spoke on the topic himself, and the passages that do address homosexuality are often interpreted with unwarranted assumptions and misunderstandings of the world that produced the Bible. We invite you to take a careful and honest look at what the Bible says about homosexuality. It may lead to some surprising conclusions!

### **Genesis 19: The Judgment on Sodom**

This story describes how two angels visited Sodom and were welcomed into Lot's house. The men of the city gather around the house and demand that Lot release the visitors to the mob so that they might "know" the visitors. The Hebrew verb "yada" (to know) has multiple meanings, one of which is to have sexual relations. It is not clear whether the mob wanted to rape the angels or to meet with them, and perhaps attack them physically. Even if the mob intended to rape the visitors, it is unclear from this page whether God destroyed the city because the citizens were uncharitable and abusive to strangers, intending to rape them.

While the passage itself does not provide a clear reason for God's punishment upon the city, two other biblical texts help us understand the sins of Sodom. First, God says in Ezekiel 16:49 what the sins of Sodom were: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy" (NASB). Interestingly, there is no reference to sexual practices. Instead, God's wrath is directed toward the social irresponsibility of the citizens of Sodom.

### **Leviticus 18 and 20: "If a Man Lies with a Man ..."**

Leviticus is a book of religious and civil regulations for ancient Israel, with two verses referencing homosexuality. Lev. 18:22 states: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (NIV) And Leviticus 20:13 states: "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads" (NIV).

The key to understanding these two verses is the term, "detestable" (or in other translations, "abomination"). This word in Hebrew, "to'ebah," has a distinctly religious meaning, referring to moral and religious evil. Many scholars believe that these verses refer to temple prostitution (both homosexual and heterosexual), which was a common practice in the rest of the Middle East at that time, which for Israelites meant committing idolatry and adultery at the same time.

Problems arise when you insist on applying these two verses literally today. Yes, in the same context, there are many regulations that are observed today such as the prohibition of incest, fraud, cruelty, idolatry, and unjust treatment of others. But in the same context, you also find passages that permit polygamy, prohibit sexual intercourse with a woman during menstruation (punishable by death or banishment), ban tattoos and wearing clothes made of a blend of textiles, ban sowing a field with more than one type of seeds, and prohibits eating pork, catfish, and lobsters—all of which are not followed by a great majority of Christians today. This shows us that one cannot simply follow what the verses say. They must be interpreted carefully and responsibly, with an understanding of the historical conditions that led to their writing.

## **Deuteronomy 23:17, 1 Kings 14:24 and 15:12: “Sodomites”?**

The King James Version contains the word “Sodomite” in each of these verses. But modern scholarship has convincingly shown this to be a mistranslation of the Hebrew word “qadesh.” That is why all modern versions represent this as “male prostitute,” rather than “homosexual.”

This, once again, is a clear reference to temple prostitution taking place in other religions of the time. And prostitution was and remains a perversion of God’s gift of sexuality whether homosexual or heterosexual.

## **Romans 1: Paul and “Natural Relations”**

In this passage, Paul addresses the sins of Gentiles (pagans) and says that God “gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity” (Rom. 1:24, NIV). Paul continues by specifying what he means by “sexual impurity:” “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion” (1:26, 27, NIV). He then goes on to talk about other sins of Gentiles such as “envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice” and others (see 1:28-32).

This passage can be taken several ways. But the crucial text here is verse 25—written right between the two references to homosexual relations. “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen” (NIV). This text is important because it points to the religious nature of the homosexual relations that Paul is talking about. As was the case in the Old Testaments cited above, Paul is referring to the idolatrous, temple prostitution practices of Gentiles whose prominent feature was homosexual prostitution.

Even if Paul was referring to homosexuals in the general Gentile population of the Roman Empire, arguing that the passage should be taken literally today poses problems. Elsewhere, Paul wrote: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Timothy 2:11, 12, NIV). On slaves, he wrote: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart” (Ephesians 6:5, 6, NIV).

Most Christians today (even conservative evangelicals) do not take these passages literally, but as reflective of Paul’s limited understanding in his time and culture. Instead, we take his immortal words to heart when confronted with issues of human dignity: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). As a finite, sinful human being, Paul did not fully embody this ideal to the degree that we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would have liked him to, but he did point to a progressive, egalitarian ideal in Galatians 3:28. Thus, even if Paul, without a fuller understanding of sexual identity and orientation that is available to us today, believed that homosexual practices are sinful, we have to make cultural and contextual allowances when interpreting Romans 1, just as we do with his words on women and slaves.

## **1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9: Difficult to Translate Words**

In 1 Cor. 6:9, Paul provides a list of types of sinners who will not enter God’s Realm. Two of the types mentioned are, in Greek, “malakoi” and “arsenokoitai.” In 1 Tim. 1:9, 10, Paul gives another such list and includes “arsenokoitai” only. The translation of the two words varies widely among translations because what Paul actually meant in these passages is not clear at all.

The first word literally means “soft” and the second “an abuser of humanity.” The first word has been translated as “effeminate” (KJV, NASB, ASV), “homosexuals” (NKJV), “adulterers” (RSV), and “male prostitutes” (NIV, NLT). These cannot all be of synonyms of each other! The second word has been translated “abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV), “abusers of themselves with men” (ASV),

“sodomites” (NKJV), “homosexuals” (NLT), “homosexual offenders” (NIV), and “sexual perverts” (RSV). Some translators have taken the core meaning of this word, which is “abuse,” and interpreted it as synonymous with homosexuality. But that is based on unwarranted assumption and requires a leap in logic. The texts themselves do not clearly support such an interpretation.

### **So What Does the Bible Really Say?**

Most Bible passages that are used to condemn homosexuality do not provide a clear denunciation of homosexuality as some have made them out to be. In addition, when they are condemning homosexuality, the Bible writers seem to have in mind the practice of temple prostitution. We will never fully understand the complete meaning of the few passages that are debated. But what is clear is that in Christ, there cannot be any distinctions and gradations of dignity. In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, and now neither straight nor queer. It’s time Christians embrace the great principle of love and respect toward all God’s children and recognize the full measure of dignity that God has bestowed upon gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered members of God’s Realm.