

Old Testament

and Homosexuality



The Fine Print

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For more information contact us at:

Whosoever Ministries, Inc.

PO Box 727

Camden, SC 29021

Email: editor@whosoever.org

Web Site: <http://www.whosoever.org>

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and Transgender Christians

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About the TeleSeminar Presenters



Rev. Paul Turner

With more than 20 years experience in ministry, Rev. Paul Turner founded Gentle Spirit Christian Church in Atlanta, Georgia in 1998.

Rev. Turner has been in Atlanta since January 1, 1994 and has been at the forefront of leadership and activism for the gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered community. Upon his arrival in Atlanta he immediately got involved with the “Olympics Out of Cobb” movement, speaking at rallies and marches. He has and continues to work with several community organizations including but not limited to: Atlanta Interfaith AIDS Network, Georgia Equality Project, Atlanta Gay Chamber of Commerce, Hotlanta Softball, Monday’s Myth Bowling, Faith Issues Community Committee. He also coached an

openly gay hockey team on a straight league and works with the Stonewall Democrats.

Rev. Turner served as the President of InTown Community Assistance for 5 years. This is a multi-church ministry that works with the homeless and jobless and he continues to serve on their Board of Directors. Rev. Turner serves as the Corporate Vice-President for Whosoever. He also writes a column for the Whosoever called “Seeds of Hope.”

He and his partner celebrated their 25th anniversary in June 2007.

Candace Chellew-Hodge

Candace Chellew-Hodge is a recovering Southern Baptist. Born in 1965 as the grand finale of five children to a Southern Baptist minister and his wife, she comes by her need for recovery honestly.

Chellew-Hodge graduated from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia in 2002 with a Master of Theological Studies degree. She was ordained in 2003 by Gentle Spirit Christian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. In July 2004, she became assistant pastor at Garden of Grace United Church of Christ in Columbia, South Carolina (what was then MCC Columbia). In 2007 she was licensed as a United Church of Christ minister and made associate pastor at Garden of Grace.

Chellew-Hodge’s first book, *Bulletproof Faith: A Spiritual Survival Guide for Gay and Lesbian Christians*, will be published September 2008 by Jossey-Bass.



1 A Little Bible History

The Bible did not drop from the sky like a divine telegram - it came to us after over many centuries of compilation. The Bible consists of many different books, written in many different literary genres, written by many different authors. In fact, the title "Bible" itself comes from the Greek "ta biblia," meaning "the books."

Here's a little history: The Hebrew scriptures were written over a period that spanned from 1800 B.C.E. to 165 B.C.E. The first Hebrew canon was finalized in 90 C.E. by the Council of Jamnia. Jesus was born circa 4 C.E. and crucified circa 29 C.E. The oldest book in the New

Testament is 1 Thessalonians. This is Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica written around 50 C.E., some 20 years after Jesus' crucifixion, and some 20 years before the first gospel, Mark, was ever penned. The first list of the 27 New Testament books that we now call "the canon" appeared in 367 C.E. So, we must keep in mind that for the first two centuries or so, Christians worshipped God without the benefit of a canonized Bible on their coffee tables. Yet,

somehow they managed to find God and serve God!

We must take this into consideration when people tell us that the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality and that the Bible is the final authority on the subject. Our earliest Christian brothers and sisters didn't have the trump card called the Bible in their day - but somehow they

still seemed to get the message that God loves us all and that Jesus' life was that special embodiment of God that can be found inside each of us. They did that without a canonized text to toss around.

Today, however, it is different. We act as if the Bible

has always been around. We believe that the Bible's authority is a given and it's been that way from time immemorial, but it's simply not so. We must take the Bible in context. We must put it in its historical place and perspective before we can ever hope to understand what messages and truths it contains for us today. To read the Bible in any other way is to abuse the text and miss God's message for us today.



Biblical Interpretation

Before we begin we must clarify the concept of “prooftexts” or isogesis. To defend their assertion that God condemns homosexuals, people always use small passages from the Bible to prove their point. Using the Bible in this manner is destructive. Instead of “*exegesis*” which involves examining the history of scripture to find out what it means and how it applies to us, “*eisegesis*” approaches scripture with a preconceived idea of what you will find there. It is abuse of scripture.

In *eisegesis* you search the Book until you find a passage you think applies and use it as your “proof” that God backs you up. You isolate that phrase or passage, take it out of context and improperly use it to back up your argument. It’s like a friend taking a sentence or phrase out of a letter you wrote and using it to represent what you believe as a whole. It’s easy to be taken out of context. You wouldn’t want your views represented that way, but that’s how the ideas and beliefs of the Bible’s authors are presented everyday!

It is our sincere hope that GLBT Christians and our critics alike will approach this material with open hearts and minds. Not everyone will come away convinced, but we’ve discovered it takes time to unlearn all the misinterpretations of scripture we’ve been taught through the years. We invite you to sit with this information, pray and meditate on it, and let God speak to your heart. We hope that when your journey is complete you’ll see God’s word with new eyes and realize GLBT Christians are welcomed in Jesus’ one word, “Whosoever.”



2 Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorrah

You all know the story well. A man named Lot takes two strangers into his home in Sodom. Later that night, all the men of the town, young and old, gather at his doorstep demanding that Lot turn over the strangers so that they may “know” them. Lot refuses and instead, offers his two virgin daughters to the crowd to do with what they will. (Remember this was an act done by a man who was found to be “righteous” by God.) The crowd becomes enraged, forcing Lot, his guests and his family to flee the city, which God then destroys in spectacular fashion.

It’s been made clear to us through the centuries that the sin of Sodom is homosexuality. The men at Lot’s door wanted to “know” the men - in a biblical sense - it’s said. The message, we’ve been told is obvious - Sodom was destroyed because all the men there were nasty homosexuals who wanted to have sex the strangers at Lot’s house - strangers who were really angels.

We’ve heard this story for so long we believe that it must always have been used to condemn homosexuals, but it’s not true. Ancient Hebrews never associated homosexuality with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. That association came about 50 AD, some 20 years after Christ was crucified, when Philo of Alexandria - a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, interpreted the Genesis word “yadha” - which means “to know” - as “servile,

lawless and unseemly pederasty.” It was not until 96 AD that historian Josephus first used the term sodomy to mean homosexual acts. (“The Christian Bible and the Homosexual” by Dean Worbois <http://www.postfun.com/pfp/homosexual.html>)

So, if the idea that Sodom went up in flames because of a bunch of flamers wasn’t the original message of this story, what was? To figure that out we have to back up a few verses into Genesis 18:16-33. Here we find that God has already decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. It wasn’t the event at Lot’s door that got the city condemned - apparently these cities had a reputation that preceded this fateful night. Abraham bargains with God and makes God promise that if even ten righteous people were found in Sodom, God would not destroy the city.

To see if such righteous people can be found, God conducts a little experiment by sending two angels into the town to investigate. The angels meet up with Lot, a relative of Abraham, who invites the men to stay at his house for the night. This is an important part of the story - and a place that becomes a source of irony in this story - but we’ll come to that in a few minutes. Showing hospitality to strangers in ancient times was not just a courtesy; it was a requirement.

Leviticus 19:33-34 says that, “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

Lot really had no choice but to allow the strangers to stay in his home. Showing hospitality to strangers was part of the law. But, the people of the town do not feel so bound to this law. They come to Lot’s door demanding “to know” the strangers. The Hebrew word used here does have a sexual meaning, but one can hardly conclude that the men of Sodom wanted to take the angels out for dinner and a play, imagining their upcoming Holy Union. No, these men wanted to rape the angels. They wanted to abuse them.

Lot’s reaction to this crowd gets short shrift in every single sermon I’ve ever heard on this subject, and unfortunately it will get it here, but it’s an action that really needs some scrutiny, especially since Lot is called a righteous man. Instead of the angels, Lot offers his virgin daughters to the crowd to do with what they please. We must remember of course that women were property in this ancient time - and if the townspeople had done to Lot’s daughters what they had apparently planned for the angels, it would have cost Lot dearly, because only virgin daughters would bring in husbands with land and money. So, Lot put his treasure outside the door in the form of his two daughters - and still is viewed as righteous.



But, that’s another story for another seminar, unfortunately.

What is clear at this juncture of our story is that the men of Sodom were not gay, but that they were brutal and hardhearted. Their intention was to harm the men in Lot’s care - a blatant breaking of Mosaic Law.

As I said before, it wasn’t until the first century that the word “sodomy” came to be equated with homosexual acts - and the reference even then was not biblical. If we look to the Bible to tell us what Sodom’s sin was, we find it spelled out quite clearly in Ezekiel 16:48-50:

“Behold, 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 an abomination before me. So I

removed them, when I saw it.”

Certainly that night at Lot’s door may have been that “abomination” - but the crime that night was not same-sex love, but same-sex rape, which should be rightly called an abomination.

Other scriptures elaborate on Sodom’s sins including a lack of justice mentioned in Isaiah, moral and ethical laxity mentioned in Jeremiah and Ecclesiastes recognizes Sodom’s sin as pride. Even Jesus says in the gospel of Luke (10:10-13) that cities that do not practice hospitality to his disciples will face a worse fate than Sodom. If we ask the Bible what the sin of Sodom was, homosexuality is nowhere to be found - and this is where the story becomes ironic.

In their haste to brand gays and lesbians as the worst sinners ever, our opponents have made us outsiders, foreigners in our own land. Recently, they've tried to codify our outsider status in our Constitution, seeking to bar us from a right enjoyed by the heterosexual majority in this country. We are vilified from pulpits and from the House and Senate floor. We are fired from our jobs, beaten by strangers, kicked out of our homes and families, ostracized by our churches, all in the name of religion and usually backed up by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

As author Daniel Helminiak points out in his book *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*:

“Such wickedness is the very sin of which the people of Sodom were guilty. Such cruelty is what the Bible truly condemns over and over again. So those who oppress homosexuals because of the supposed “sin of Sodom” may themselves be the real ‘sodomites,’ as the Bible understands it.”

Notes:

3

Leviticus: Like a Bad Penny

Perhaps Sodom and Gomorrah is too easy to put into its proper perspective, thus neutralizing its power to be used to condemn homosexuality. Our opponents are not out of ammunition in the Old Testament however. If we can take the Sodom story away from them, they've always got Leviticus to fall back on. Like a bad penny, the two verses in Leviticus used against us always pop up, always out of context, because it seems to be the clearest admonition against homosexuality that the Bible offers.

I read it all the time in letters to the editor like one that appeared in a local newspaper. Ralph Geddings wrote to say that, "If gays and lesbians of the world think God made them that way they might want to pick up the Bible and read Leviticus 20:13." His letter then ridicules churches with gay and lesbian ministers as people who have "surely misplaced their Bibles," and ironically says that America will be "another Sodom and Gomorrah" if we don't change our wicked ways. Which begs the question, which wicked ways - our way of pride, wealth, inhospitality to foreigners, and disregard of the poor? We've just learned that those were the sins of Sodom. Perhaps Mr. Geddings hasn't made it that far into his Bible.

But, this verse is always trotted out whenever the subject of homosexuality comes up. Our opponents like it because it's right

to the point, "you shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Short, memorable, and totally out of context.

These verses occur in what is known as "The Holiness Code" - a "list of laws and punishment [that] spells out requirements for Israel to remain 'holy' in God's sight." [Helminiak, page 53]

Rev. Jonathan Loppnow and Rev. Paul C. Evans write in a paper on homosexuality and the Bible called *Same Gender Sexual Behavior and the Scriptures*:

It is likely that the prohibition thou shall not lie with a male as with a woman came about for one of the following reasons:

*** Only sexual acts which could lead to procreation were valued as the tribes needed to grow in numbers in order to survive.**

*** Male homosexual sex may have been connected in the Hebrew mind with idolatry. Notice that Lev. 18:2 deals with idolatry. In fact many of the prohibitions in the Holiness Code were probably connected with idolatrous practices, see 19:26-29.**

*** Women were second class citizens in the Hebrew culture and were generally treated as property. If a man was penetrated in sexual intercourse he was being treated like a woman and so was degraded in the Hebrew mind. The offense was not that this was a**

homosexual act, the offense was that a MAN was treated like a WOMAN. (<http://members.cox.net/paulmcc/mcc/samegen.html>)

We need to remember that the Hebrew people saw themselves as God's chosen people - set apart from other tribes and peoples around them. Because they were separate they were not to engage in practices that these other - not chosen people - engaged in. The biggest practice that was forbidden to the Hebrews was any involvement in the religious practices of other tribes. Deuteronomy 23:17 prohibits Israelite men and women from becoming temple prostitutes. Leviticus 20:13 is flanked by verses forbidding the Israelites from sacrificing their children to the pagan god Molech which clearly shows that the condemned homosexual acts are associated with idol worship. There is no condemnation in Leviticus, or the entire Bible for that matter, of loving, committed gay and lesbian relationships.

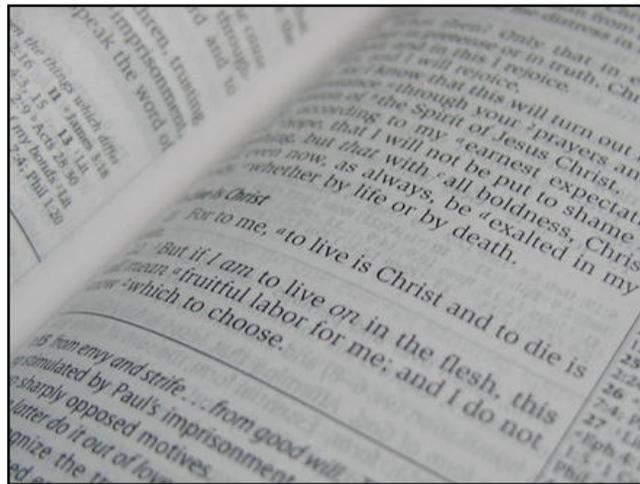
Those who use Leviticus to condemn gays and lesbians miss some other important points as well. Number one, Levitical law is not a cafeteria plan. You can't pick and choose which law you will uphold and which ones to disregard. The Hebrews understood that if you break one law, you're guilty of breaking the entire law. There are plenty of laws in Leviticus

that we now totally disregard, even though they too are described as "abominations" - which merely means that these activities are "unclean," ritually impure, but not moral "sins." Some of these other unclean things are pork, shellfish, wearing mixed fiber clothing, sowing two different seeds in a field, and tattoos. We feel free to eat at Red Lobster, enjoy the other white meat, wear cotton/poly blends and

legalize tattoo parlors here in South Carolina but feel free to retain that one Levitical law simply because it backs up a long-held prejudice. Ralph Geddings of Sumter does anyway.

The other incredibly important point that people who

piously quote Leviticus to condemn gays and lesbians is Jesus' life and work. Jesus' life, death and resurrection in our heart fulfilled the law. We are no longer under the law, but are now under grace. We can feel free to eat pork, shrimp, wear clothing made of blended fabrics and get tattoos. We are no longer under the law. Those who wish to hold onto those two passages only reveal their own agenda and prejudices. They again show us the irony of the Sodom story and reveal their own hardheartedness and inhospitality against their fellow brothers and sisters who happen to be gay and lesbian.



Other Passages

DEUTERONOMY 23:17-18, I KINGS 14:24 AND I KINGS 15:12

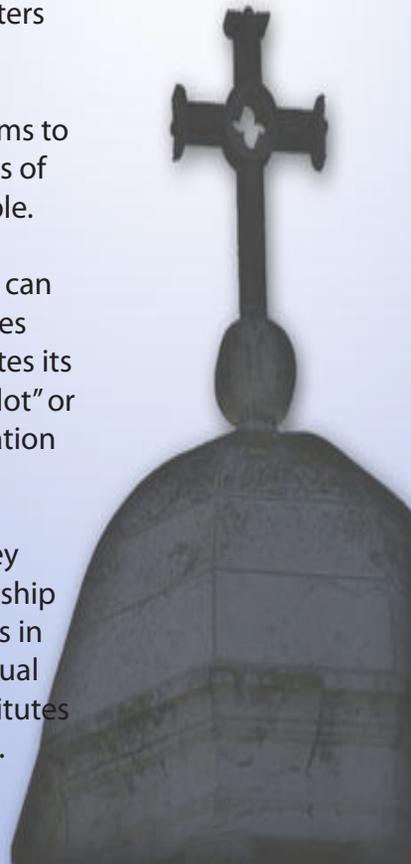
These are passages about temple prostitutes, with an underlying concern about idolatry, not homosexuality. They all refer to a “qadesh” which means “holy one” or “someone set apart for a holy purpose”. The clearest translation of this concept would simply be “temple or ritual prostitute”.

For example, Deuteronomy 23:17 should be translated thusly: “There shall be no ritual prostitute of the daughters of Israel, or a ritual prostitute of the sons of Israel”. Any translation which translates “qadesh” as “pervert” or “sodomite” is blatantly mistranslating. In fact, there seems to be no such word as “sodomite” in the original languages of the Bible, despite its frequent use in the King James Bible.

An excellent example of bias in translating the Bible can be found in the New King James version which translates “qadesh” in its male form as “perverted one” but translates its female form as “ritual harlot”, both should be “ritual harlot” or “prostitute”. What purpose could there be in this translation discrepancy?

These passages do not condemn homosexuality. They address the practice of religious prostitution in the worship of a foreign god. To interpret the use of male prostitutes in idol worship as a condemnation of all same gender sexual behavior would also mean that the use of female prostitutes by men condemns all opposite gender sexual behavior.

**Source: Same Gender Sexuality and the Scriptures
by Rev. Jonathan Loppnow and Rev. Paul C. Evans**



4 In Conclusion

Hear the good news: the Old Testament holds no condemnation for us, and even includes two stories of same-sex love that is blessed by God. David and Johnathan's love for each other was "more wonderful than that of women" we're told in 2 Samuel 1:26. The vow made between Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 1:16-17 is well known.

"Entreat me not to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

Again, ironically, this vow between two women is used in heterosexual wedding ceremonies.

We must remember that whenever we read the Bible we are interpreting its meanings and often we bring our own prejudices and ideas to the text that may not have been in the minds of the original writers. Everything said in this teleseminar is based on the work of biblical scholars and we should remember that there are an equal number of biblical scholars on the other side of the issue who have come up with very different interpretations of these same passages. That is why we issue this caveat:

Even if the Bible does condemn all homosexual acts, even those that occur within the context of a loving, committed relationship, we need to ask ourselves if they still have any moral authority on us. We have already decided, as a society, that the Bible's approval of slavery no longer has any sway over us. We have already decided as a society that the Bible's view of women as property and unfit for ministry is no longer binding on us. We have decided, as a society, that people of different races are no longer inferior, even though the Bible has been used to justify such feelings in the past. We have discarded many things that the Bible says we must observe, including Jesus' direct command that divorce is permitted only when the woman cheats. So, we ask you to consider this question, even if the Bible condemns homosexuality as we know it today, why should we, as a society, accept that condemnation, now that we know so much more about homosexuality as a sexual orientation and not as a mental illness or defect?

But, our contention is, and will always be, that when the Bible is read in context, no condemnation can be found of loving, committed gay and lesbian relationships. All the sexual acts we've discussed are acts of brutality or idol worship. This is not how we conduct our lives today. This is not how we live as gay and lesbian Christians.

Hear the good news - you are blessed by God, and not condemned.

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The Bible and Homosexuality by Dr. Mona West

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