

Homosexuality

Speaking the
Truth in Love

Edward T. Welch



P U B L I S H I N G

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Homosexuality¹ is *the* hot issue of the day. Even more than abortion, it will confront the church throughout this generation, forcing us to listen, study, and respond wisely.

So get ready. Don't rely on your biblical study on homosexuality from a few years ago. Don't assume that knowing the criticisms of biological research on homosexuality means that you are prepared. Today new interpretations of Scripture and sophisticated medical studies are persuading more people that committed homosexual relationships are biblically permissible.

In response either we must repent and say that we have misinterpreted Scripture or we must offer a position that is compassionate, biblically sound, and able to account for the observations of current research. Also, if we maintain that homosexuality is sin, then we must not only *defend* that position, but we must develop a strategy to *pursue* homosexuals and urge them to repentance and faith.

We can defend our views through careful, prayerful study. Pursuit, however, is not easy.

We as the church must consider not only *what* we say but *how* we say it.

The *How* of Biblical Dialogue

The *how* of biblical dialogue begins with our own personal repentance. Before we confront sin in others, Matthew 7:1–5 urges us to acknowledge that the sin in our own hearts is on an even grander scale. When we do this sincerely, it can be disarming. It is hard to argue with someone who is spiritually humble! Yet, sadly, the practice is difficult and uncommon.

Many Christians can admit that they are sinners, but they don't see their sin in the same category as homosexuality. Homosexuality, being a sin "against nature" (see Rom. 1:26–27), is viewed as abnormal even among sins. Christians can see in their hearts the seed of most other sins, but many cannot even imagine being tempted by homosexuality. Yet Scripture makes it clear that homosexuality comes from the same heart that generates greed, envy, strife, disobedience to parents, and gossip (Rom. 1:29–32). As Christians, we should pursue homosexuals with humility, repentance, and not a hint of self-righteousness.

This personal repentance, however, is just the beginning. Because of our unity with the Christian church as a whole, there are corpo-

rate sins in which we share. Has the church been, at times, self-righteous toward homosexuals? Is there “homophobia” in some of our congregations, fear, or even hatred? Do we tend to think of homosexuality as worse than the gossip and private idolatries that are rampant in the church? Has the church been unwelcoming to spiritually searching homosexuals? The answer to these questions is certainly, “Yes, *we* have sinned.”²

But what if you personally have not sinned against a homosexual? Perhaps you have never even met one. According to Daniel and Nehemiah, we may not be personally guilty for certain sins, but our unity with God’s people means that we share in the church’s corporate sins, and it is appropriate to confess them. Consider Daniel’s prayer:

O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets. . . . (Dan. 9:4–6)

This can be a starting point in speaking with homosexuals. Ask how *the church* has

sinned against them. Then, if you find even a kernel of truth in what is said, ask forgiveness, and invite them to talk with you further.

If discussion seems possible, get ready for a challenging dialogue. You will be going to a place where assumptions give different meanings to words, and strategies for biblical interpretation seem completely foreign. Homosexuals have their own identity, culture, socialization process, and theories of knowledge. What seems biblically straightforward to many Christians might be understood very differently by a homosexual. Fundamental words such as "sin" may mean one thing to you but something else to homosexuals. For you it means disobedience before the Lord; for the homosexual it may mean harming other people. You appeal to the Bible as the final word in all discussion; the homosexual may appeal to feelings and certain personal and political rights. Such differences are bound to lead to misunderstanding unless we are prepared.

At the outset, the church must be clear that, although it can err in its interpretation of the Bible and is happy to be corrected, it stands under the Word of God. It cannot give away any ground on the authority of Scripture. God's Word is not always easy to apply, but we should expect the Holy Spirit to help us reach unity with those who truly want to

know what God says about this important subject. The goal is discovering “Thus says the Lord.”³ Our beliefs are not rooted in our feelings; rather, they are found in the teaching of Scripture.

The Biblical Data

Even with the different grids we use, it is fairly easy to agree with homosexuals on one point: the Bible is unambiguous and consistent in prohibiting homosexuality. At every mention⁴ it is condemned as sin.

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman. (Lev. 18:22)

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. (Lev. 20:13)

Because of this [idolatry], 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. (Rom. 1:26–27)

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders [*arsenokoitai*] . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9–10)

Some argue that because Jesus did not specifically condemn homosexuality, the case against it is less conclusive. But there are many sexual behaviors that Jesus did not address specifically, such as incest, bestiality, and rape. That doesn't mean they were permissible. Jesus upheld the Old Testament law. Furthermore, he indicated that the only alternative to heterosexual marriage was celibacy (Matt. 19:10).

The Homosexual Response

Even so, the response of most homosexuals to these passages tends to be, "What does this have to do with me?" The passages are considered irrelevant because the homosexual hermeneutic (principles of interpretation) suggests that these verses refer to those who participate in "unnatural," noncommitted sexual relationships. The prohibitions, they say, do not apply to committed, loving relationships.

The reasoning goes like this: The Bible does not speak about "natural" homosexuality, only the "unnatural" cultic male prostitution

or “unnatural” homosexuality practiced by heterosexually oriented people.⁵ The Bible (it is argued) does not speak specifically to people who are oriented toward homosexuality.

Therefore, to develop a biblical theology of homosexuality, the homosexual hermeneutic says that we should look at other, more relevant Scripture—the texts that teach about heterosexual relationships. If the biblical principle is that sexual behavior is the privilege of committed, loving relationships, for heterosexuals it will occur within marriage; for homosexuals lacking the legal sanction of marriage, it will occur only when there is love for or loyalty to the same-sex partner. Casual homosexual or heterosexual relationships are wrong, but sex within marriage or a marriage-like relationship is good.

There are variations on this logic, but the homosexual hermeneutic is consistent on two points: (1) There is a “natural” homosexual orientation that is not addressed in Scripture, and (2) the biblical prohibitions against homosexuality do not apply to modern homosexual “marriages.”

How Should We Think Biblically?

To many Christians, this sounds like a drinker who claims that the biblical passages

on drunkenness do not apply to him because he is an alcoholic. But the logic cannot be discarded too quickly. Doesn't it seem that many homosexuals don't choose homosexuality? Instead, they have the orientation from birth? And isn't it true that there are differences between biblical times and now? Don't we consider some biblical passages to be time-limited cultural applications of truth rather than eternal moral verities?

For example, many churches do not require women to wear a head covering or be silent. Why? Because the Corinthian church was part of a unique culture that had distinct ways of expressing submission (1 Cor. 11:3–16). The principle is submission, not coverings. But if we can do this with coverings, why not homosexuality?

Was biblical homosexuality “unnatural,” and is present homosexuality “natural”?

Current arguments rely heavily on the idea that modern homosexuality is “natural,” a God-given orientation like left-handedness. The “shameful lusts” mentioned in Romans 1:26 refer to reckless homosexuality or homosexual behavior by a heterosexual.

This argument is essential to the homosexual position: homosexuality is an identity. Nobody chooses it. It just is. Homosexuality is as

natural to homosexuals as heterosexuality is to heterosexuals. And how can we as Christians expect people to change their identity? How can God expect those *he* has oriented toward homosexuality to go against their nature?

Although most Christians don't condone homosexual activity, they have been affected by the homosexual agenda enough to believe that there is some sort of homosexual orientation. The Ramsey Colloquium, a group of Jewish and Christian scholars, certainly agree.

Although we are equal before God, we are not born equal in terms of our strengths and weaknesses, our tendencies and dispositions, our nature and nurture. We cannot utterly change the hand we have been dealt by inheritance and family circumstances, but we are responsible for how we play that hand.⁶

Even well-known evangelicals like Tony Campolo have been sympathetic to this idea.⁷ But we must be very careful at this point because the consequences are profound. For example, if you accept the idea of a sinless homosexual orientation, you will soon ask how God can hold people responsible for a homosexuality they never chose. Isn't homosexuality God's decision? The church cannot live

with the idea of a natural homosexual orientation without, at some point, reinterpreting Scripture to bring it in line with our sense of the character of God. The very least that will happen is that the church will back away from the severe warnings of Scripture, such as that “homosexual offenders” will not “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–10). This sounds too harsh for broken people who need healing (in contrast with sinners who need repentance).

A second result of accepting a homosexual orientation (while rejecting the behavior) is that all we can say to those with a homosexual orientation is “look but don’t touch.” “You will always think about it and want it, but don’t actually *do* homosexual behavior.” The victims of such counsel will never have the privilege of rooting out sin at the level of the imagination. Eventually they will feel justified in being angry with God for giving them an orientation but refusing to let them act on it.

The church must educate itself on this critical issue, so that it can engage the homosexual community in biblical discussion. The problem, however, is that the idea of homosexual orientation relies on neither biblical data nor medical research. Instead, it is a political position intended to gain homosexual rights, and it is rooted in personal experience. Therefore,

neither biblical data nor critiques of the medical literature will be persuasive.

Ultimately, most homosexuals simply appeal to both their own feelings and the experience of their homosexual brothers and sisters. "Homosexuality feels right to us, so it is natural. It is part of our created constitution." Despite this potential unresponsiveness, however, we should keep examining the arguments biblically.

It is biblically possible that some Old Testament passages on homosexuality were intended, in part, to distance the Israelites from the practices of the Canaanites. One of those practices may have been the male prostitution of Canaanite religion (Deut. 23:17–18). This "unnatural" homosexuality was condemned. But is this the *only* kind of homosexual activity that is condemned?

If the Old Testament prohibitions pertained only to cultic prostitution, why would the New Testament continue them? The New Testament church did not have to distance itself from Canaanite religions. The church did, however, want to demonstrate God's holiness in its sexual behavior to distance itself from the general licentiousness of the culture.

If Leviticus were solely concerned with male prostitution, it would be a unique departure from the other biblical sexual standards.

Many Levitical laws were similar to those of the surrounding nations, but the Israelite codes consistently were morally stronger and more refined. For example, unchastity was punished more severely, and prostitution was illegal, not just regulated. Given the generally negative attitudes toward homosexual acts common in places such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon,⁸ it would be completely out of character for the Old Testament law to prohibit homosexuality associated with idol worship while permitting it for other purposes. Even if a passage like Leviticus 18:22 did have cultic prostitution in mind, this connection would make homosexuality in general all the more abhorrent.⁹

What about the other use of “unnatural”? Is it possible that the biblical texts were referring to “unnatural” homosexual acts by heterosexuals? This would suggest that the practicing homosexuals of the Bible were involved in homosexuality against their natural design. Yet the nature of sin is that people sin because they *want* to sin (James 1:13–15). It comes from our desires. No one goes into sin kicking and screaming. Homosexuality existed in biblical times because people enjoyed it; they were oriented toward it by their own hearts (Mark 7:21–23). To make an artificial distinction between homosexual prac-