

ESV Study Bible | English Standard Version

Homosexuality

God's Original Design

In God's original design, human sexual conduct was to occur within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. The first chapter of the Bible says, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” ([Gen. 1:27](#)). Differentiation of the human race into two complementary sexes (“male and female”) is the first fact mentioned in connection with being “in the image of God.” In [Genesis 2](#), which describes in more detail the process summarized in [1:27](#), God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” ([Gen. 2:18](#)). Genesis then applies the example of Adam and Eve to all marriages: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” ([Gen. 2:24](#)). This “one flesh” sexual union was thus established as the pattern for marriage generally, and Jesus cites [Genesis 1:27 and 2:24](#) as the normative pattern that God expects all marriages to follow (see [Matt. 19:4–6](#)). Furthermore Paul, as a good disciple of Jesus, likewise strongly echoes [Genesis 1:27 and 2:24](#) in his two primary texts on homosexual practice, [Romans 1:23–27](#) and [1 Corinthians 6:9](#). Jesus and Paul both assume the logic of sexual intercourse implied in Genesis: a sexual bond between a man and a woman requires two (and only two) different sexual halves (“a man” and “his wife”) being brought together into a sexual whole (“one flesh”).

This is further emphasized in the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's side:

And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh ([Gen. 2:22–24](#)).

The word “therefore” connects the making of Eve from a part of Adam's body with the “one flesh” sexual union between a man and a woman in marriage: it is the reunion of the two constituent parts of a sexual whole. It is not another man who is the missing part or sexual complement of a man, but rather a woman. (Jesus emphasizes this connection between the two different sexes, “male and female,” in [Matt. 19:4–6](#) and [Mark 10:6–8](#).)

Prohibited Sexual Relations

Consistent with the pattern in [Genesis 1–2](#), sexual intercourse outside of the marriage relationship between one man and one woman is prohibited. For example, “You shall not commit adultery” ([Ex. 20:14](#); reaffirmed by Jesus in [Matt. 19:18](#); cf. [Rom. 13:9](#); [James 2:11](#)). In addition, other specific kinds of sexual intercourse outside of marriage are also prohibited, such as prostitution ([1 Cor. 6:15–18](#)), incest ([Lev. 20:11–21](#); [1 Cor. 5:1–2](#)), and bestiality ([Lev. 18:23; 20:15–16](#)).

Homosexual conduct is also viewed as a sin (something contrary to God's will) in several passages of the Bible. [Leviticus 18:22](#) says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination [Hb. *to 'ebah*, actions that are extremely displeasing to God]." Similarly, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination" ([Lev. 20:13](#); cf. [Genesis 19](#); also [Jude 7](#)). These absolute Levitical prohibitions are grouped with other relevant sex proscriptions (incest, adultery, bestiality) and are considered first-tier sexual offenses that are grouped together in [Leviticus 20:10–16](#).

In the NT, Paul speaks of homosexual conduct:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error ([Rom. 1:26–27](#)).

The phrase "contrary to nature" means that homosexual conduct does not represent what God intended when he made men and women with physical bodies that have a "natural" way of interacting with each other and "natural" desires for each other. (See note on [Rom. 1:26–27](#); cf. also [Rom. 1:19–20](#), that the truth about God and his moral law is visible and apparent in the material creation.) Homosexual desires are "dishonorable" both because they are contrary to God's purpose and because they treat a person's biological sex as only half of what it is. While the logic of a heterosexual bond is that of bringing together the two (and only two) different and complementary sexual halves into a sexual whole, the logic of a homosexual bond is that another person of the *same* sex complements, and fills what is lacking in, that same sex, implying that each participant is only half of his or her own sex: two half males making a full male or two half females making a full female. In other words, the logic of sexual intercourse requires a sexual complement, and thus a same-sex bond is a self-devaluing of one's own gender inasmuch as one sees the need to complement structurally one's own sex with someone of the same sex.

In a long list of sins, Paul also includes "men who practice homosexuality" ([1 Cor. 6:9](#)). This phrase translates two different Greek terms: *malakos* means "soft" or "effeminate" and was commonly used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to the "passive" partner in homosexual acts, while *arsenokoitēs* is a combination of Gk. *arsēn* (meaning "man") and *koitē* (here meaning "sexual intercourse"). The term *arsenokoitēs* was apparently coined by Paul from the Septuagint (Greek translation) of [Leviticus 20:13](#), and means (in plural) "men who have intercourse with men." In [1 Timothy 1:10](#) Paul uses the same word *arsenokoitēs* in the midst of vices derived from "the law" (here, the second half of the Ten Commandments), which means that this verse also should be interpreted as an absolute prohibition of male-with-male intercourse, in keeping with [Leviticus 18:22](#); [20:13](#). Early Jewish interpretation of [Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13](#), and early Christian interpretation of [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) and [1 Timothy 1:10](#), also show that these verses were understood as absolute prohibitions against all types of homosexual conduct.

Does the Bible address the question of homosexual attitudes and desires? It must be remembered that God ultimately requires moral perfection, not only in human actions but also in attitudes of the heart. Therefore the Bible prohibits not only adultery but also a desire for adultery ([Ex.](#)

20:17; cf. [Matt. 5:28](#)), not only theft but also coveting ([Ex. 20:17](#)). This is because “the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” ([1 Sam. 16:7](#)). Therefore Scripture teaches that any desire to break God's commandments is also viewed as wrong in God's sight. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” ([Matt. 5:8](#)). While an impulse to do what God expressly forbids is (by definition) an impulse contrary to God's will, the Bible recognizes that Christians will be “tempted” by their “own desire” ([James 1:14](#)) and encourages Christians in such circumstances to “remain steadfast” ([James 1:13](#)) and to “be doers of the word” ([James 1:22](#)). This implies not actively entertaining the wrongful impulse (cf. [Matt. 5:28](#)), and not dwelling on it so that it “gives birth to sin” ([James 1:15](#)).

It is not surprising, therefore, that not only homosexual conduct but also homosexual desires are viewed as contrary to God's will. Homosexual desires are viewed as “dishonorable passions” ([Rom. 1:26](#)), and Paul also says that homosexual partners are “consumed with passion for one another” ([Rom. 1:27](#)), giving a strong image of a powerful but destructive inward craving.

This is not to say that homosexual *desire* is as harmful as homosexual *conduct*. Though all sin is wrong and brings legal guilt before God (cf. [James 2:10–11](#)), a distinction between wrongful desires and wrongful actions can be made with regard to many areas of life. Hatred of another person is wrong in God's sight, but murdering the person is far more harmful. Coveting a neighbor's farm animals is wrong, but actually stealing them is much more harmful. And lustful desires for adultery are wrong, but actually committing adultery is far more harmful. Similarly, homosexual desires are wrong in God's sight, but actually committing homosexual acts is far more harmful.

The Bible's Solution regarding Homosexuality

As with every other sin, the Bible's solution to homosexuality is trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, the imputation of righteousness, and the power to change. After talking about the “sexually immoral” and “adulterers” and “men who practice homosexuality” and “thieves” and “drunkards” ([1 Cor. 6:9–10](#)), Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, “And such were some of you” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#)). Then he tells them, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” ([1 Cor. 6:11](#); cf. [Rom. 6:23](#); [Phil. 2:13](#); [1 John 1:9](#)). This implies that some former homosexuals in the church at Corinth had left their previous homosexual lifestyle and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, were seeking to live lives of sexual purity, whether in celibacy or in faithful, heterosexual marriages.

It is important that the Christian community always show love and compassion toward those engaged in homosexual conduct, and also extend friendship toward them where opportunities arise, though not in a way that signals approval of homosexual practice. It is also important to extend hope for change, since many homosexuals will say that they long to establish a different pattern of life. However, a number of studies have concluded that long-term change from a homosexual lifestyle seldom occurs without a program of help and encouragement from others.

Objections

Numerous objections have been presented against the view that homosexuality is morally wrong. One objection is that some people are “born gay,” that is, that many homosexuals do not choose their homosexual orientation but it is part of their genetic makeup from birth, and so homosexuals can never change, and for them homosexual behavior cannot be wrong. But, as noted above, Paul, in talking about “men who practice homosexuality” (1 Cor. 6:9), says to the Corinthian church, “And such were some of you” (1 Cor. 6:11), indicating that homosexuals can change and become former homosexuals. This does not mean that homosexual desires will automatically or necessarily be eradicated for those who come to Christ. Becoming a Christian does not mean that people will no longer experience intense sinful urges (sexual or otherwise). But genuine faith does produce the fruit of obedience and real, substantive change, and Paul indicates that this is precisely what happened with some who had practiced homosexuality in Corinth.

Some argue that science supports the argument that homosexuality is determined by one's biological makeup from before the time of birth. Studies have in fact shown some indirect, congenital influences on homosexual development that may increase the *likelihood* of homosexual development. But there are certain hereditary factors that give people a greater likelihood of developing all sorts of different sinful behavior patterns (such as frequent wrongful anger, violence, adultery, alcoholism, and so forth), and it would not be surprising to find that some people, from certain hereditary backgrounds, have a greater likelihood of developing homosexual desires and conduct. But this is far different from proving congenital *determinism* of homosexuality, that is, that some people are genetically incapable of making any other choice than to entertain homosexual desires and engage in homosexual conduct. Especially significant are studies of identical twins, where one has become a homosexual and the other has not, even though they have identical genetic makeup.

The moral teachings of God's Word, not people's inward desires, must be the final standard of right and wrong. It is important to recognize that (1) virtually all behavior is, at some level, biologically influenced, and that (2) no command of God is predicated for its validity on humans first losing all desire to violate the command in question.

As for environmental factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of homosexual behavior, two of the most significant, particularly for male homosexuals, are the physical or emotional absence of a caring father during childhood years, and sexual abuse sometime during childhood or adolescence.

Another objection is to say that the biblical passages concerning homosexuality only prohibit certain kinds of homosexual conduct, such as homosexual prostitution or pedophilia, or unfaithful homosexual relationships. (This is sometimes called the “exploitation argument”: the Bible only prohibits exploitative forms of homosexuality.) But there is no legitimate evidence in the words of any of these verses, or their contexts, or in evidence from the ancient world, to prove that the verses were referring to anything less than all kinds of homosexual conduct by all kinds of people. Two biblical counterarguments against the “exploitation argument” may be briefly mentioned: (1) In Romans 1:23–27 Paul clearly echoes Genesis 1:27, indicating that Paul viewed any sexual relationship that did not conform to the creation paradigm of “male and female” to be a violation of God's will, irrespective of whether the relationship is loving. (2)

Paul's absolute indictment against all forms of homosexuality is underscored by his mention of lesbian intercourse in Romans 1:26, since this form of intercourse in the ancient world was not typically characterized by sex with adolescents, slaves, or prostitutes.

Some have suggested that the Sodom and Gomorrah episode does not point to judgment on homosexual practice, but relates only to coercive homosexual practice. But Genesis 19:4–5 indicates that homosexual conduct was characteristic of the entire city and was a primary reason for God's judgment (cf. the note on Jude 7).

Some object that the phrase “contrary to nature” in Romans 1:26–27 shows that Paul is only talking about people who “naturally” feel desires toward a person of the opposite sex but who then practice homosexuality. Paul says, “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (Rom. 1:26–27). According to this view, Paul is not saying anything about people who “naturally” feel desires for a person of the same sex, for such desires would not be “contrary to *that person's* nature.” However, this is reading into the text a restriction that has no basis in the actual words that Paul wrote. He does not say “contrary to *their* nature,” but “contrary to nature” (Gk. *para physin*), a phrase that is used several times in literature outside the Bible to speak of all kinds of homosexual conduct as something contrary to the natural order of the world. In other words, Paul is not saying in Romans 1:24–27 that some people switched their innate heterosexual urges for contrived homosexual urges, but rather that people exchanged or left behind sexual relations with a true sexual complement (someone of the other sex) to gratify their inward urges for sex with members of the same sex. Paul sees such people as choosing to follow their desires over God-ordained creation structures.

Finally, there is an objection from experience: some homosexual “couples” have faithful, fulfilling relationships, so why should these be thought immoral? But experience should not be used as a higher standard for moral right and wrong than the teaching of the Bible. In addition, many studies indicate that, particularly among male homosexuals, long-term one-partner relationships are uncommon, and the widespread pattern is many sexual partners, often numbering many hundreds over the years. An additional harmful result of homosexual conduct is often immense damage to the family structures of a society and also to physical health (e.g., various studies have shown a significant reduction in life expectancy for homosexual males compared to the general population).

Same-sex Marriage?

Proposals for governments to recognize “same-sex marriage” should be evaluated in light of the Bible's teaching that one role of civil government is to “praise those who do good” (1 Pet. 2:14). Government recognition of a relationship as a “marriage” carries with it the *endorsement* and *encouragement* of that relationship by a society. Married couples enjoy many protections and benefits (legal, financial, and interpersonal) that society has granted in order to encourage marriage and signal that the institution of marriage brings benefits to society as a whole. So the question is really whether a society, through its laws, should give approval and encouragement to homosexual relationships that both the Bible and most cultures throughout history have considered to be morally wrong rather than “good,” and that also bring significant harmful

consequences. Governmental recognition of “same-sex marriage” would imply a requirement to allow homosexual couples to adopt and raise children, and this would rob many children of the opportunity to be raised in a home with both a father and a mother, which is by far the best environment for them. In addition, government recognition would likely soon carry with it governmental prohibitions against criticizing homosexual conduct.

Conclusion

Homosexual conduct of all kinds is consistently viewed as sin in the Bible, and recent reinterpretations of the Bible that have been raised as objections to that view do not give a satisfactory explanation of the words or the context of the relevant verses. Sexual intimacy is to be confined to marriage, and marriage is to be only between one man and one woman, following the pattern established by God in creation. The church should always act with love and compassion toward homosexuals, yet never affirm homosexual conduct as morally right. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers the “good news” of forgiveness of sins and real hope for a transformed life to homosexuals as well as to all sinners.