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## UNDERSTANDING OUR RESPONSE TO LGBT CULTURE

by Matt Holland

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In times past, it felt safe to hold the classical biblical viewpoint on homosexuality and even share it in public. Today, however, the smallest comment can bring a violent wave of labels and accusations from online bullies, the press, and certainly the social media public consciousness. Just ask Chick-fil-a. As Christians who take the Bible as God's truth, what should we do? Is it the better part of wisdom to remain silent? Or should we be prepared to speak the truth in love? This may be a difficult truth that our culture hates, but we must ready ourselves nonetheless.

For several years now, the secular culture at large has worked hard to force a widespread acceptance of the sexuality of the LGBT community. After appearing sporadically in the '90s, gay characters began to make more regular appearances in movies and TV shows in the 2000s, and the goal has typically been to portray normalcy.

Then five Supreme Court justices declared that gay marriage is a constitutional right. As Christians who read the Bible, we need to know what we believe. We live in a world that is demanding more and more that we be prepared with an answer.

In the wake of all of these things, full articles and trite declarations have raced around social media claiming that the God of the Bible has no problem with gay marriage. Of course, the basic claim of these articles is that homosexuality is not sin. Some are written by pastors who call themselves evangelical Christians, so this is not just a debate between Christians and everyone else. We have an issue that divides us within the church and makes many of us feel at odds with the culture, and we need more intelligent discourse on this question. Getting there begins with understanding Scripture's claims on the subject.

**A Biblical Survey.** Yes, the Bible clearly states that engaging in homosexual activity is a sin. This word choice, “engaging in homosexual activity,” intentionally avoids the term “being gay” because what and who you are is a question of identity, and the Bible’s address of the LGBT topic is about engagement in homosexual physical relationship, not self-identification.<sup>1</sup>

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both say that if a male lies (the Old Testament euphemism for “has sex”) with another male as he would with a woman it is an abomination, or “perversion” in some translations, and the latter reference even calls for them both to be put to death. These verses are each a part of a list of sexual impurities, including sleeping with one’s sister-in-law, with your own mother-in-law, with a stepmother, or even with animals.

The point here is that God has designed sex for a particular expression, which He described in Genesis 2: “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). These passages are not merely saying that homosexual sex is sinful. They remind us that all variations of sex outside of the marriage relationship that God created are outside of His plan. God created sex as a wonderful gift to men and women who marry according to His pattern. All the other ways, including male with male or female with female, are sin.

Many argue that we have no room to say that anyone should follow these verses because we Christians don’t follow most of what the book says. Yes, Levitical law also calls for us to worship by sacrificing bulls, prohibits us to mix cotton and polyester or to cut the sides of our hair, and requires farmers to sow only one kind of crop per field. What do we do with these verses?

The Old Testament Law (i.e., all of the rules given to Moses in Exodus through Deuteronomy) provided instructions for the Hebrew people to follow during that time. We are, of course, supposed to read it and learn from it, but we are not compelled to follow it like they did. We don’t sacrifice lambs every Sunday morning. The New Testament said that Christ came to fulfill the Law, and that we are no longer bound by the Law but free from it. We, as Jesus’ followers living on this side of the cross, must follow what Scripture commands in the New Testament, but it often restates Old Testament commandments. For example, nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, so, yes, we must still honor our parents and worship no other gods.

Please don’t read this to say that the Old Testament is not useful for us. It tells us volumes about who God is, what He cares about, and helps us to make sense of our story as Christians who worship Jesus now. There is a distinction, however, between ceremonial law and universally binding moral law. The practice of animal sacrifice falls under ceremonial law, from which Jesus freed us. Universally binding moral law, on the other hand, stays consistent throughout the Old and New Testaments and applies to all people at all times; and specific moral laws repeated in the New Testament help us to understand these parts of God’s law that irrevocably flow from His character.

In Romans 1, Paul opens his letter to the church in Rome by demonstrating the inherent understanding that all people must have: God does indeed exist. Paul writes that those who do not acknowledge God had every reason to know that He is real and present, but chose to worship other things instead. After they chased after lusts instead of God, He gave them up to whatever wickedness they had pursued. The primary sin, as it always has been, was idolatry. After that, he lists murder, gossiping, foolishness, slander, and others. Paul reserves the most space, however, for his commentary on homosexuality. "Their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature. The men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men." In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul makes a similar list. He writes that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God, and he pens several examples of these unrighteous, including "men who practice homosexuality."

These verses very plainly make their point, but some liberal theologians argue that we misread them. Some have suggested that in Romans the actual sin in view is the violation of a monogamous male homosexual relationship; others say that the Greek word in 1 Corinthians that we have translated "homosexual" could have meant "male prostitute"<sup>2</sup> but that scribes have chosen the antigay option because of their own prejudice.

Neither of these arguments holds up under examination. The context of Romans 1 includes the first verse that flatly states that female engagement in same-sex relationships is unnatural. This line does not make sense if the sin in question is merely homosexual adultery or prostitution. Why would Paul so clearly condemn homosexual female activity and then proceed merely to chastise only those homosexual males who have multiple partners? Then in 1 Corinthians, there are other words Paul could have used that clearly designate prostitute, so why would he use language so open to confusion? Further, the plain reading of both passages conforms to and confirms the Old Testament morality that God commanded. The only reason to opt for a different reading is wishful thinking. Those who don't want to believe that the Bible condemns homosexual relationships grasp at straws with this kind of argument, but the clear reading of the Word here is obvious. God intends sex to be between a married man and woman.

**A Cultural Defense.** And then there are some who will say that we are choosing judgment over love if we take this stance, but this suggestion is shortsighted. Some time ago, the magician and outspoken atheist Penn Jillette said that he doesn't respect Christians who don't share their faith. In fact, he said that you have to be hateful to believe that heaven and hell exist and not tell people about it. He makes a strong point, and I believe the same principle applies here.

If I believe the Bible is truly God's Word, which I do, and I understand that Romans 1 says that those who practice (and give approval to) homosexual relationships are headed toward death and destruction, then it would not be loving in the least for

me to tell people that gay marriage is great and I'm happy for them. God hasn't called me to change people's behavior or condemn them, but neither has He authorized me to give approval to behaviors He calls sin.

One last criticism, which I have heard many times, is that this world is full of wars, slavery, and starvation, so it is silly and small-minded to worry about what people do in their own bedrooms. This suggestion, much more shortsighted than the previous one, assumes that people who hold to biblical sexuality cannot think of two things at the same time. Many, many Christians believe that the Bible is true and relevant concerning our sexuality and also hate murder, slavery, and prostitution. We can hold all of these views at once as we work to honor God in our moral consciousness.

**Loving Others.** The first thing that Jesus calls us to do is to love God, and the second is to love each other. My brothers and sisters, I write this to you so that we all may consider what God's Word calls us to do and believe concerning homosexuality. I hope that this article helps you understand your theology in light of this issue, but we must love our gay friends regardless of our theological stance. Speak the truth in love. Learn to disagree in love. Don't be surprised when non-Christians act and believe like non-Christians.

We should understand the biblical view of homosexuality because every part of His Word helps us to know our God better, not because we are crusading to change the behavior of gay people. Yes, we should be saddened by the tidal wave of acceptance for homosexuality sweeping this world, but not angered. Rather, we must live and speak the gospel, know what we believe, and pray for the Holy Spirit to intervene, remembering full well that He is the only true agent of change.

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## NOTES

1. Identity is another issue, and a very important one, that I believe is really the core of the culture of homosexuality. It needs, however, another article that specifically addresses it as a topic because it doesn't serve the point of this article.
2. *Arsenokoitas* in the Greek primarily means "homosexual." Though rare and typically unwarranted, it can be stretched to mean "male prostitute."