

CHRISTIANITY and THE LGBTQ EXPERIENCE

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A primary basis for Christian attitudes toward LGBTQ persons derives from the Bible, in passages that apparently condemn same-sex activity. However, there are two differing ways of approaching this book:

► **INERRANCY (LITERALISM) > the Bible as unchanging fact**, accurate and error-free (e.g., the world was actually created in 7 days; Methusaleh lived for 969 years; dinosaurs disappeared because Noah had no room for them in the Ark)

Evangelical Churches, Southern Baptist

► **BIBLICAL CRITICISM > the Bible as testimony to the faith, reflecting the circumstances of a particular time**, subject to critical examination and review (e.g., the creation of the world is not specific to a 7-day timeline -- evolution can be accepted as a scientific concept; Methusaleh's many years are not historical, but intended to show long life symbolically because he was a good man).

Mainline Protestant: Anglican/Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Reformed Church of America, Roman Catholic

Through much of Western history since the Roman Empire, the Bible was seen as a factual document: this was true up to the 18th/19th centuries.

Then came a shift, to see the Bible as a library of different types of literature, reflecting various times and circumstances. This change was informed by the newest scientific and archaeological discoveries; names such as Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley are associated with these developments.

Despite considerable resistance in Christian circles –still found in many parts of the US today -- a new view of the Bible emerged: a testimony to faith, not fact; a series of messages addressed to particular historical situations and challenges; and recognition that writing history in ancient times was far different than what it later became.

Biblical Criticism would raise these questions about context, to better understand different books: → How did this text originate? → What was the background and situation? → What was the message delivered to this particular time? → What meanings can be found in the languages used?

Example: The Book of Jonah, Chapters 1-5 ... Biblical criticism dates this book to about 450 BC, although the events in the story take place many years before, prior to the end of the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC.

Jonah Flees His Mission to Nineveh

1. Jonah's Commission to Preach Repentance to the Assyrians in Nineveh
2. His Flight from the Commission
3. The Endangered Sailors Cry to Their Gods
4. Jonah's Disobedience Exposed

5. Jonah's Punishment (Swallowed by a Great Fish) and his Deliverance

Jonah Reluctantly fulfills His Mission to Nineveh

1. Jonah's Renewed Commission and Obedience
2. Nineveh Repents and is Acknowledged by the Lord
3. Jonah's Deliverance and Rebuke

For the New Testament, an interesting approach to Biblical criticism comes from the scholarly Jesus Seminar, which has been active since 1985: the search for the “historical Jesus” vs. the Jesus of religious faith.

Link : <http://theconversation.com/getting-the-gist-of-a-historical-jesus-the-jesus-seminar-30-years-on-44465> and <https://www.westarinstitute.org>.

Sample questions:

- Was Jesus actually born in Bethlehem – or is this a way to associate him with King David in the Hebrew Scriptures, who also came from Bethlehem? Did Jesus actually escape into Egypt as an infant – or is this a way to identify him as a new Moses? (Outside of the Bible, there is no evidence for these events.)
- What sayings might come directly from Jesus instead of the faith about him of the early Judeo-Christian community? (e.g., Matthew 5:39: “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”)

Biblical texts that actually address LGBTQ issues are few, and subject to debate among scholars. They include passages in the Hebrew Scriptures (*The Old Testament*, which covers an historical span of approximately 2000 years before the lifetime of Jesus), and are listed below.

- Genesis 19:4-11 ... The Sodom and Gomorrah Story (much debate about this account)
- Leviticus 18:22 ... “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”
- Leviticus 20: 13 ... “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.”

At the same time, the story of David and Jonathan in the Book of Samuel illustrates an emotionally engaged relationship between two men. And it also noteworthy that the Hebrew Scriptures prohibit a variety of other activities –imposing a death penalty for many of them:

- Eating fat, shellfish, or pork
- Performing any work on the Sabbath
- Consulting a psychic or spiritualist
- Tattoos, Drunkenness, Adultery
- Planting more than one kind of seed
- Cutting hair; clipping a beard
- Wearing clothes made from more than one type of cloth
- Wearing a red dress

Further, the Bible – at various points -- lends approval to the massacre of enemies, polygamy, incest, the subordination and inferiority of women, strict celibacy, and slavery; in fact, throughout the Roman world, slavery routinely entailed sexual exploitation from slave-owners, to which slaves could not resist -- since they had no legal rights.

Scholars consider that same-sex activity was widely tolerated – even accepted -- among societies in the ancient Middle East and Egypt, as well as in the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world and in the later Roman world. Prostitution by both sexes also existed, although only male clients had access to these services. (The Bible often mentions prostitutes, but does not always identify their gender.)

This is the environment in which the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament were composed.

The New Testament includes the Four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; Letters; and Book of Revelation (or Apocalypse), covers an historical span of approximately 100 years from the lifetime of Jesus and for a period that followed. There are a few passages that address same-sex activity.

- Romans 1: 27 ... “In the same way, their males also abandoned their natural sexual function toward females and burned with lust toward one another. Males committed indecent acts with males, and received within themselves the appropriate penalty for their perversion.”
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 ... “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men, nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”
- Jude 1:7 ... “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.”

Yet there is no reference to LGBTQ persons or relationships anywhere in the Gospels. Jesus makes no mention of it at all. Rather, the greatest commandment stated in the Gospels is on love of God and love of neighbor:

- Matthew 22:34-40 ... “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”
- In the same Gospel of Matthew, admission into the kingdom of God – and conversely, the condemnation to hell -- is based on the treatment of others. (Sex plays no part in the text.)
- Matthew 25:31-46 ... “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me ... whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

In the New Testament especially, there is frequent emphasis on social injustice, and the imbalance between wealth and poverty. Each of the four Gospels present the quotation where Jesus says that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The most vivid story told about damnation to hell in the New Testament involves a wealthy man who ignores a poor cripple outside his gate (Luke 16: 19-31).

Once more, sex is entirely absent from this parable.

Recent scholarly publications about the Bible and Human Sexuality are:

► Michael Coogan (Lecturer on Hebrew Bible / Old Testament at Harvard Divinity School) ***God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says (2010)***

► Jennifer Wright Knust (Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Boston University School of Theology): ***Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire (2011)***

Also ...

► William O. Walker, Jr (Jennie Farris Railey King Professor Emeritus of Religion at Trinity University, San Antonio, TX): "What the New Testament Says About Homosexuality" (2008):
<http://www.westarinstitute.org/resources/the-fourth-r/what-the-new-testament-says-about-homosexuality>.

These authors point out that the Bible says very little about same-sex relationships – but says much about loving one's neighbor. They criticize efforts to cherry-pick the individual passages to support sweeping condemnations of homosexuality, while ignoring a much greater emphasis throughout the Bible on issues of social justice.

Before and during the American Civil War, the Bible was sourced frequently to support the continuation of slavery, and then later to oppose giving women the right to vote, or to maintain racial segregation.

In fact, the Bible is routinely cited in America today to advocate gun ownership, national exceptionalism, the elimination of social welfare programs, and the condemnation of Islam or other religions. We see US politicians who identify as strongly Christian while supporting positions such as those above ... which would seem to be entirely contradictory to religious principles:

As conservative columnist Michael Gerson wrote, in a recent Op-Ed article for The Washington Post:

"On the consistent evidence of Jesus' ministry, what public attitude did he condemn the most? He stood against people who talked constantly of the law, who thought they were especially virtuous, who enjoyed scolding people, who judged others without tenderness and understanding. He was at constant war with the self-righteous and took the side of the social outcasts they condemned."

Although many people think so, no Bible passage says, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Post-Biblical Christianity

The concept is widely held that Christianity always had strong opposition to LGBTQ persons. Churches have long held to a Biblical view that marriage was intended between a man and woman for purposes of procreation. (Genesis 2:24 says, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”) It is only much later that mutual love also becomes recognized as a purpose of marriage.

Consequently, what was outside the religious and reproductive norm was condemned. Christian writers of the Roman era, like Tertullian and Clement railed against LGBTQ activity. After the adoption by the Roman Empire of Christianity in the 4th century AD, statutes became more severe, with threats of death or castration for LGBTQ behavior.

A law from 342 AD issued by joint emperors Constantius II and Constans stated that marriage based on unnatural sex should be punished severely. In 390 AD the emperors Valentinian, Theodosius, and Arcadius all declared that any man taking the role of a woman in sex would be publicly burned to death.

John Chrysostom in late 4th century Constantinople preached some of the most virulently anti-homosexual sermons in the history of Christianity, while the 6th century Byzantine Emperor Justinian instituted extremely harsh penalties against homosexuals.

But despite these prohibitions ...

A number of male couples and several female couples were honored as saints from the very same Roman era: many were reported to have been martyred during the persecution of Christians and buried together.

By the 9th century, almost every area in Christian Europe had local law codes, including detailed sections on sexual offenses; but none outside of Spain forbade same-sex acts. By the High Middle Ages, a gay subculture seems to have thrived, as it had in Greco-Roman times. We find many examples of same-sex love poetry in monasteries.

The Archbishop of Canterbury in England, Anselm (c. 1033-1109), was presented with a decree by the council of London calling for harsher penalties against "sodomites". But he refused to publish the decree, noting that the practice was widespread, and that ordinary people did not even know it was wrong.

There appears to have been no universalized opposition to homosexuality in Christian Europe until the late 12th century (Lateran Council of 1179 AD), aside from a period a century around the end of the Roman Empire (476 AD).

The mediaeval historian Norman F. Cantor (1929-2004) concurred with Boswell's assessment about the relative tolerance of society in the Early Middle Ages in his book, **The Last Knight: The Twilight of the Middle Ages and the Birth of the Modern Era (2005)**.

During the next centuries this began to change rapidly – so much so, that by 1300 same-sex activity among men was a capital offense through much of Europe. The church saw sex and other pleasurable experiences as evil and a source of sin, unless intended for procreation.

Christian opposition to homosexuality arose strongly at a time when medieval society began to marginalize and oppress many minority groups, at the start of the Crusades (c. 1100 AD): these minorities included Jews, heretics, the poor, and usurers. Muslims were vilified with charges of same-sex activity and even rape, further contributing to a change of attitude on LGBTQ issues.

Sodomy came to be associated with heresy, which was a capital crime. In 1307 the French king Philip IV used this combination of charges to disband the Knights Templar, a military religious order dating back to the Crusades, and to try and convict their leadership – who were subsequently burned at the stake.

Similar accusations were used against religious groups considered to be heretical, outside the Christian mainstream because of beliefs and practices. (e.g., the Cathars, the Waldensians, etc.). Ironically, some of these groups advocated sexual abstinence instead of marriage!

Notwithstanding, kings from England, France, and Spain were reported to engage in same-sex relationships, including the famous English 12th century monarch, Richard I “The Lionhearted.” A stage play and the later Oscar-winning film, *The Lion In Winter* (1968), clearly portrayed this aspect of the king's personal life.

There is, of course, abundant evidence at this same time for heterosexual activity involving church leaders, including popes. Despite rules for celibacy, many kept mistresses and had children. In addition, several popes are reputed to have taken male lovers, notably Benedict IX who held office 1036-1048.

In 15th century Italy, at least a third of the male population in Florence was accused of sodomy, according to Michael J. Rocke's 1989 article, **Male Homosexuality and its Regulation in Late Medieval Florence**.

Two landmark books about the development of Christian attitudes toward same-sex activity are noted below:

► JOHN BOSWELL (1947-1994): *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980)

Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality (1980) is a ground-breaking and controversial work which offered a revolutionary interpretation of the Western tradition, arguing that the Catholic Church had not condemned gay people throughout its history, but rather, at least until the 12th century, had shown no special concern about homosexuality and even celebrated same-sex love among men.

Scholarly reactions differ. Importantly, the book brought forward a fresh emphasis on the crime of rape being the actual sin of Sodom, rather than the same-sex acts. This idea calls into question any connection between LGBTQ people today and the Biblical Sodomites.

Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality earned the American Book Award for History and the Stonewall Book Award in 1981, but Boswell's thesis was criticized by various academic critics; some believed that he had attempted to whitewash the historic crimes of the Christian Church against gay men, while others felt he projected late 20th century LGBTQ attitudes into earlier times.

► LOUIS CROMPTON (1925-2009): ***Homosexuality & Civilization (2003)***

Homosexuality and Civilization took 19 years to write. Working through the records documenting same-sex love, Louis Crompton tackled the history of homosexuality in Europe and parts of Asia over a 2500-year period, from ancient Homer to the 18th century.

The author detailed the "rich and terrible" stories of men and women who have been immortalized, celebrated, shunned or executed for the special attention they paid to members of their own sex.

In the context of world history, Crompton's comparative study states that Judeo-Christian aversion to homosexuality was an anomaly. Other cultures around the globe were more embracing.

Defying the current trend that holds that gay history began only about 1700--or even as late as 1869--this book affirms the continuity of gay history. Even in the West, which has seen strong anti-homosexual sentiment, the pattern over time is one of affirmation / retreat / renewed affirmation.

Same-Sex Marriage: Romance or Bromance?

Two ground-breaking studies are considered below:

► JOHN BOSWELL: ***Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe (1994)***

Rites of so-called "same-sex union" (Boswell's proposed translation) occur in ancient prayer-books of both the Western and Eastern churches. They are rites of *adelphopoiesis*, literally Greek for the making of brothers. Boswell argued that these should be regarded as sexual unions similar to marriage -- despite the fact that the rites explicitly state that the union involved in *adelphopoiesis* is "spiritual" and not a "carnal."

The Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe (1994) argues that the *adelphopoia* liturgy was evidence that the attitude of how Christian church towards homosexuality has changed over time, and that early Christians did -- on occasion -- accept and bless same-sex relationships.

For example, 12th century liturgies for same-sex unions involved the pair joining their right hands at the altar, marriage prayers, and a ceremonial kiss.

This is a highly controversial point of Boswell's text, as other scholars have dissenting views of this interpretation, and believe that they were instead rites of becoming adopted brothers, or "blood brothers".

Boswell pointed out such evidence as an icon of two saints, SS. *Sergius and Bacchus* (at St. Catherine Monastery in Egypt), and drawings, such as one he interprets as depicting the wedding feast of Byzantine Emperor Basil I to his "partner", John. Boswell sees Jesus as fulfilling the role of the "pronubus" or in modern terms, the best man at the wedding.

Boswell made many detailed translations of these rites in *Same-Sex Unions*, and claimed that one mass gay wedding occurred several centuries ago in the Basilica of St John Lateran, the cathedral seat of the Pope as Bishop of Rome.

Boswell's writings touched off considerable debate. Although some of his books became best-sellers, they made few concessions to easy reading for the popular market. His books have many footnotes, and he applied his specialties with several ancient and modern languages (notably Greek).

However, Mark Jordan, author of ***The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*** (1997) and a gay historian from Washington University in St. Louis, disagreed broadly with Boswell's analysis. He saw the Christian Church as consistently antagonistic to LGBTQ persons.

► ALLAN TULCHIN: ***Same-Sex Couples Creating Households in Old Regime France: The Uses of the "Affrèment."*** *Journal of Modern History* (2007)

Civil unions between male couples in medieval Europe existed around 600 years ago, based on historical evidence, including legal documents and gravesites. This data can be interpreted as supporting the prevalence of same-sex relationships in past centuries, wrote Allan Tulchin of Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania.

If accurate, the results indicate socially sanctioned same-sex unions are not new, nor were they taboo in the past. "Western family structures have been much more varied than many people today seem to realize," Tulchin wrote in the *Journal of Modern History*. "And Western legal systems have in the past made provisions for a variety of household structures."

For example, he found legal contracts from late medieval France that referred to the term "affrèment," roughly translated as *brotherment*. Similar contracts existed elsewhere in Mediterranean Europe.

In the contract, the "brothers" pledged to live together sharing "one bread, one wine and one purse." The idea referred to the idea that all of the couple's goods became joint property. Like marriage contracts, the "brotherments" had to be sworn before a notary and witnesses, Tulchin explained.

The same type of legal contract of the time also could provide the foundation for non-nuclear households, including arrangements in which two or more biological brothers inherited the family home from their parents and would continue to live together, Tulchin said.

But non-relatives also used the contracts. In cases that involved single, unrelated men, Tulchin argues, these contracts provide “considerable evidence that the *affrèrés* were using *affrèvements* to formalize same-sex loving relationships.” Tulchin also uncovered a record for the religious marriage for a same-sex couple from 1601 in Spain.

Medieval relationships are tricky at best to figure out. “I suspect that some of these relationships were sexual, while others may not have been,” Tulchin said. “It is impossible to prove either way and probably also somewhat irrelevant to understanding their way of thinking. They loved each other, and the community accepted that.”

In the end, these studies at least show diversity and ambiguity about the ways that Christianity interfaced with same-sex relationships over the course of time.

We cannot always be certain about what occurred among couples in the privacy of home back in the distant past; but it is clear that in Christian history close personal attachments between people of the same sex were honored and celebrated.

Today there are many openly-LGBTQ clergy, as well as religious organizations for members of various Christian denominations. In America these include: **Dignity (Catholics) ... Integrity (Episcopalians) ... Reconciling in Christ (Lutherans) ... Axios (Eastern Orthodox)**

However, a recent religious survey in the US found that nearly half of all LGBTQ persons surveyed said they had no religious affiliation at all. (This is twice the American average.) Another survey in New Zealand found that 75% of LGBTQ persons contacted had no religious affiliation.

Christian Churches around the world have actively struggled with how to address LGBTQ issues for the past half-century. Several positions would be noted:

- Inerrancy-related views that condemn all same-sex activity and orientation outright.
- “Blame the sin, but not the sinner.” The orientation is sinless, but any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage as being completely wrong.
- Welcome, in varying degrees. A number of churches – as well as synagogues and other houses of worship -- around the DMV display rainbow flags and identify as “Welcoming Communities.” Various churches around the world will celebrate weddings for LGBTQ couples.

Moderate positions in the Anglican church have threatened to cause a schism (break) with more conservative and traditional branches. Anglican churches in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK are at odds with their counterparts in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. In fact, the Anglican Church in Scotland has been sanctioned because of its readiness to celebrate same-sex marriages:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/03/scottish-bishop-defends-same-sex-marriage-love-means-love>

The Catholic Church has struggled with these issues for many years. Current LGBTQ controversies in the US are outlined here, inflamed by alt-right groups and vigorous use of social media. The present crisis about sex abuse by Catholic priests and bishops (including the former Cardinal Archbishop of Washington) has revived charges that gay men are responsible for victimizing.

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/bishop-morlino-others-charge-homosexual-subculture-clergy-abuse-crisis>

Right-wing Catholics had focused their attention on anyone who publicly proposes new pastoral approaches on LGBTQ issues.

<https://thinkprogress.org/alt-right-catholics-targeting-lgbtq-8802b5ed1729>.

Catholic bishops in Ireland opposed same-sex marriage in 2015, but the public gave overwhelming support instead, making Ireland the first nation to approve same-sex marriage by public vote. (In fact, the current Prime Minister of Ireland, Leo Vadar, is openly gay.)

As of 10/01/2018, same-sex marriage is legally recognized in the following 24 countries:

Argentina	Belgium	Brazil	Canada
Colombia	Denmark	Finland	France
Germany	Iceland	Ireland	Luxembourg
Malta	Mexico (<i>selected</i>)	Netherlands	New Zealand
Norway	Portugal	South Africa	Spain
Sweden	United Kingdom	USA	Uruguay

Same-sex marriages will be legally recognized in Austria and Taiwan during 2019.

All of these countries have a long Christian history, but most today show decreasing levels for church attendance -- or even for individual Christian belief.