

The Samaritan Institute
at
The Sunshine Cathedral

The Bible &
Homosexuality

A Six Week Course

*"Here at the Sunshine Cathedral, we are
seekers and students of Truth, empowered
by Spirit, sharing the Light with the World"*

Sunshine Cathedral
is
A Metropolitan Community Church
Affiliated with The Center for Progressive Christianity

TSI is the educational arm of the Sunshine Cathedral

Lesson 1

(Rev. Durrell is the Senior Pastor of Sunshine Cathedral. He holds a BA from Henderson State University, an MA from Goddard College, an MDiv from Union Theological Seminary, and a DMin from the Episcopal Divinity School)

A Gay-Positive Theology in Question & Answer Form by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins

Is it a sin to be gay?

“Sin” means to miss the mark (an archery metaphor). To “be” anything is a matter of ontology (of “is-ness”). So to discover that one is something and to be honest about it can never be missing the mark. Self-discovery and expressing one’s truth with integrity is hitting the bull’s eye! It is no more a sin to be gay than it is a sin to be male, or female, or tall, or short, or American, or French, or Kenyan, or Japanese, or left-handed. Human sexuality is one of many aspects that are integrated into the wholeness of one’s being, and as is the case with most things in nature, it is expressed in a variety of ways. The short answer is that it is NOT a sin to be gay.

Did Jesus condemn homosexuality?

Jesus condemned precious little. One of the few things that he did condemn was the tendency of religious people to participate in condemnation! Jesus seemed to have a great deal of patience with almost everything other than self-righteous people who tried to enforce religious rules in a way to oppress or control others. Beyond that, Jesus never said anything about homosexuality, except for a couple of times when he might have been considered sympathetic to homosexual realities.

When was Jesus sympathetic to homosexual persons?

First of all, let’s not force a Euro-centric, 19th century view of same-gender love/attraction onto the first century, Palestinian Jesus. The word “homosexual” would not have been part of Jesus’ vocabulary, and our understanding of homosexuality might not have even existed in Jesus’ world! However, you may recall that in the 8th chapter of Matthew’s gospel (and the story is repeated in the 7th chapter of Luke’s gospel) Jesus heals a centurion’s servant. The original hearers of that story would have assumed that the servant was the centurion’s lover. From what we know of 1st century Roman culture, we know that such relationships were not uncommon. And for a person of such high rank to be so concerned about a servant that he would approach a faith healer of lower status and another religion in a desperate attempt to help his servant suggests an intimacy far greater than one would expect between a military officer and his “servant.” How did Jesus respond to the

centurion? He praised his faith! His relationship was not condemned or even questioned.

You said there may be a couple of times when Jesus was friendly toward same-sex expressions of love. What is the other example?

In Matthew 19, Jesus defines “eunuchs” in a much broader sense than we normally hear. He says that, there are those who are castrated, which is the usual definition. But he also says there are 2 other kinds of eunuchs. He said some “choose” to be eunuchs (living a life of celibacy) and that others are “born” eunuchs (people who by nature, or from birth, are sexually different). He also said that not everyone would accept his broad and inclusive (and non-judgmental) definition of eunuchs, but he said, “whoever can accept this ought to accept it.” Jesus was giving an example of sexual diversity...some are sexually different because they’ve been surgically altered. Others are different because of personal choices (to not marry or to remain celibate). And still others are different because they are born different...they are innately different. He did not suggest that anything was wrong with any of the eunuchs, and he certainly did not propose an “ex-eunuch” program. Some of us are “different” from the majority, and Jesus seems to suggest that it’s OK, and that everyone who can accept such diversity needs to accept it! His teaching reminds us of Isaiah 56 where the prophet places these words in the mouth of God, “The eunuch need not say, ‘I am a dry (barren) tree’...I will give them in my house a monument and name which will be even better than having children; an eternal, imperishable name...For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” In any case, Jesus never condemned same-sex love or attraction.

But aren’t there bible verses that say it is a sin to be gay?

Not exactly. It depends on how you read the bible. The people who wrote the documents that in time became our bible were products of their time and culture. They had specific agendas and were writing to particular communities, usually in response to definite events. None of them had any idea that 21st century Americans would be reading their work. In fact, none of them knew there was a North American continent or that the world wasn’t flat. And so, we do read statements in the bible that support slavery, that assume women are in some way inferior to men, that seem to suggest God takes sides in bloody military conflicts. Today, we do not accept that women are in any way inferior to men. Today, we believe slavery to be one of the greatest evils of human history. Today, many of us believe that war is almost never the will of God. Do we read the bible with an awareness of its historical and cultural and linguistic contexts? Or do we cling to isolated verses that seem to support one prejudice or the other? How we choose to read the bible will determine if we believe the bible promotes homophobia.

What About Sodom & Gomorrah?

Some people will suggest that Genesis 19 condemns homosexuality. It is the story of Sodom & Gomorrah, where a gang of violent men threaten to rape two strangers. The strangers happen to be angels (and presumably male), but the obvious “sin” of the story has nothing to do with the genders of the characters. Rape is always brutal, inhuman, horrifying, terrible and wrong. No one could disagree with that. There isn’t any love or even healthy attraction in the story. Degrading or hurting someone by forcing them to perform any sexual act against their will demands our outrage. But that has nothing to do with gay people finding joy in their mutual relationships.

It is interesting that people who bring up Genesis 19 never mention how the chapter ends. The “hero” of the story, Lot, gets so drunk that he allows himself to be seduced by his daughters. Neither he nor his daughters are condemned in the story for their incest (or for being so drunk he didn’t realize that incest was a bad idea!). In fact, the children of those incestuous unions are said to be the ancestors of the enemies of the writer’s community. The story much more clearly insults the Moabites and the Ammonites than it does same-gender loving people; in fact, love is not only NOT condemned in the story, it isn’t even mentioned!

Doesn’t Leviticus say it’s wrong to be gay?

Leviticus discourages certain behaviors, but its writers have no clue that sexuality might be biologically predisposed or that it might be a psycho-social orientation. So, no, Leviticus doesn’t condemn any contemporary notion of homosexuality because it is not aware of any such notion. The book lays out many prohibitions for an ancient community. Those prohibitions include wearing certain types of fabric, eating shellfish and pork, even getting tattoos! Leviticus 19.26 even says it is wrong to eat rare meat! Isn’t it funny that people who think Leviticus justifies their anti-gay prejudices have no problem eating seafood or rare steaks or adorning themselves with body art?

Are there any other biblical passages to consider?

Not many. Out of the entire bible, 66 books (a few more if you’re Roman Catholic) written by many people covering a period of more than a thousand years, we’ve already discussed half the passages that are routinely used to shame, condemn, harass, or terrorize gay and lesbian people! The other three passages come from books attributed to St. Paul in the New Testament (most notably, 2 verses from the first chapter of Romans, which is almost always taken out of context and even misquoted; the context for the Romans 1 passage is idolatry, not sexual orientation). Each of those passages, when taken in their cultural, historical, linguistic, and literary contexts can be deconstructed in ways that are actually quite liberating for same-gender loving people!

The bible is against rape, exploitation, and harming your neighbor (and rightly so!). It is not a collection of books meant to condemn love, mutuality, or any life-affirming situation.

Remember, Jesus never condemned gay people (and may have advocated for them in some ways). And consider these passages from the bible that some of us believe accurately sum up God's message for the human family: "God is love and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them!" – 1 John 4.16; "Love your neighbor as yourself." – Leviticus 19.18; "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare, not for woe! plans to give you a future full of hope." – Jeremiah 29.11; "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ." – Romans 8.1; "By the grace of God I am what I am." – 1 Corinthians 15.10; "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law." – Galatians 5.22-23; "...You are all one in Christ." – Galatians 3.28

God is love. Those who love genuinely experience God. Love your neighbor (even your gay neighbor!). Believe that God wants you to have hope (not fear or regret or self-hatred). There is no law against love. We are all one, and we are not condemned by God, who graciously has called us to be what we truly are. This is the message of the bible. It doesn't tell us who to hate. It tells us how to love. We can be sure that LBTG people are as capable of living love-filled, God-filled lives as anyone else. It is not a sin to be gay. We are all one, and it is by the grace of God that we are what we are.

© The Reverend Durrell Watkins 2004, 2009

Discuss what you learned in this lesson.

What was "Good News"?

What was empowering?

What was comforting?

What was challenging?

Lesson 2

(Rev. Don Eastman is the retired Vice-Moderator of Metropolitan Community Churches, a former Assemblies of God pastor, and a graduate of Central Bible College)

Homosexuality; Not A Sin, Not A Sickness

by Rev. Elder Don Eastman

©Copyright 1990 Los Angeles Universal Fellowship Press

“Whosoever”

The most beautiful word in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is *"whosoever."* All of God's promises are intended for every human being. This includes gay men and lesbians. How tragic it is that the Christian Church has excluded and persecuted people who are homosexual!

We are all created with powerful needs for personal relationships. Our quality of life depends upon the love we share with others, whether family or friends, partners or peers. Yet, lesbians and gay men facing hostile attitudes in society often are denied access to healthy relationships. Jesus Christ calls us to find ultimate meaning in life through a personal relationship with our Creator. This important spiritual union can bring healing and strength to all of our human relationships.

Not a Sin, Not a Sickness

For many centuries, the Christian Church's attitude toward human sexuality was very negative: sex was for procreation, not for pleasure; women and slaves were considered property to be owned by males; and many expressions of heterosexuality, like homosexuality, were considered sinful. Such tradition often continues to influence churches today. Many churches teach that women should be subordinate to men, continue to permit forms of discrimination against peoples of color, and condemn homosexuals. They say that all homosexual acts are sinful, often referring to their interpretation of scripture.

Other churches today are influenced by a century of psychoanalytic thought promoted through a powerful minority in the field of medicine. They see homosexuality as some kind of sickness. Although this view has now been soundly discredited by the medical profession, some churches and clergy continue to be influenced by the idea. They say that homosexuals are "imperfect" and in need of "healing."

The Good News is that, since 1968, when Metropolitan Community Church was founded, the emergence of a strong lesbian and gay community, and the conclusions of new scientific studies on homosexuality have forced the Christian Church to reexamine these issues. A growing number of biblical and theological scholars now recognize that Scripture does not condemn loving, responsible

homosexual relationships. Therefore, gay men and lesbians should be accepted - just as they are-in Christian churches, and homosexual relationships should be *celebrated and affirmed!*

Changing Interpretations...the Impact of Study

Biblical Interpretation and Theology also change from time to time. Approximately 150 years ago in the United States, some Christian teaching held that there was a two-fold moral order: black and white. Whites were thought to be superior to blacks, therefore blacks were to be subservient and slavery was an institution ordained by God. Clergy who supported such an abhorrent idea claimed the authority of the Bible. The conflict over slavery led to divisions which gave birth to some major Christian denominations. These same denominations, of course, do not support slavery today. Did the Bible change? No, their *interpretation* of the Bible did!

What influences lead us to new ways of understanding Scripture? New scientific information, social changes, and personal experience are perhaps the greatest forces for change in the way we interpret the Bible and develop our beliefs. Scientific awareness of homosexual orientation did not exist until the nineteenth century.

Most Christian churches, including Metropolitan Community Church, believe the Bible was inspired by God and provides a key source of authority for the Christian faith. Therefore, what the Bible teaches on any subject, including sexuality, is of great significance. The problem, however, is that sometimes the Bible says very little about some subjects; and popular attitudes about those matters are determined much more by other sources, which are then read into the biblical statements. This has been particularly true of homosexuality. But fortunately, recent scholarship refutes many previous assumptions and conclusions.

The Bible is a collection of writings which span more than a thousand years recounting the history of God's relationship with the Hebrew and Christian people. It was written in several languages, embraces many literary forms, and reflects cultures very different from our own. These are important considerations for properly understanding the Bible in its context. There are vast differences in doctrines between various Christian denominations, all of which use the same Bible. Such differences have led some Christians to claim that other Christians are not really Christians at all! Biblical interpretation and theology differ from church to church.

What was the Sin of Sodom? – Scripture Study

Genesis 19:1-25

Some "televangelists" carelessly proclaim that God destroyed the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of "homosexuality." Although some theologians have equated the sin of Sodom with homosexuality, a careful look at Scripture corrects such ignorance.

Announcing judgment on these cities in Genesis 18, God sends two angels to Sodom, where Abraham's nephew, Lot, persuades them to stay in his home. Genesis 19 records that "all the people from every quarter" surround Lot's house demanding the release of his visitors so "we might know them." The Hebrew word for "know" in this case, *yadha*, usually means "have thorough knowledge of." It could also express intent to examine the visitors' credentials, or on rare occasions the term implies sexual intercourse. If the latter was the author's intended meaning, it would have been a clear case of attempted gang rape.

Horrified at this gross violation of ancient hospitality rules, Lot attempts to protect the visitors by offering his two daughters to the angry crowd, a morally outrageous act by today's standards. The people of Sodom refuse, so the angels render them blind. Lot and his family are then rescued by the angels as the cities are destroyed. Several observations are important.

First, the judgment on these cities for their wickedness had been announced prior to the alleged homosexual incident.

Second, all of Sodom's people participated in the assault on Lot's house; in no culture has more than a small minority of the population been homosexual.

Third, Lot's offer to release his daughters suggests he knew his neighbors to have heterosexual interests.

Fourth, if the issue was sexual, why did God spare Lot, who immediately commits incest with his daughters? Most importantly, why do all the other passages of Scripture referring to this account fail to raise the issue of homosexuality?

Ezekiel 16:48-50

states it clearly. The people of Sodom, like many people today, had abundance of material goods. But they failed to meet the needs of the poor, and they worshipped idols. The sins of injustice and idolatry plague every generation. We stand under the same judgment if we create false gods or treat others with injustice.

The Holiness Code – Scripture Study

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

Christians today do not follow the rules and rituals described in Leviticus. But some ignore its definitions of their own "uncleanness" while quoting Leviticus to condemn "homosexuals." Such abuse of Scripture distorts the Old Testament meaning and denies a New Testament message.

"You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination." These words occur solely in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, a ritual manual for Israel's priests. Their meaning can only be fully appreciated in the historical and cultural context of the ancient Hebrew people. Israel, in a unique place as the chosen people of one God, was to avoid the practices of other peoples and gods.

Hebrew religion, characterized by the revelation of one God, stood in continuous tension with the religion of the surrounding Canaanites who worshipped the multiple gods of fertility cults. Canaanite idol worship, which featured female and male cult prostitution as noted in *Deuteronomy 23:17*, repeatedly compromised Israel's loyalty to God. The Hebrew word for a male cult prostitute, *qadesh*, is mistranslated "sodomite" in some versions of the Bible.

What is an "Abomination"?

An abomination is that which God found detestable because it was unclean, disloyal, or unjust. Several Hebrew words were so translated, and the one found in Leviticus, *toevah*, is usually associated with idolatry, as in Ezekiel, where it occurs numerous times. Given the strong association of *toevah* with idolatry and the Canaanite religious practice of cult prostitution, the use of *toevah* regarding male same-sex acts in Leviticus calls into question any conclusion that such condemnation also applies to loving, responsible homosexual relationships.

Rituals and Rules

Rituals and Rules found in the Old Testament were given to preserve the distinctive characteristics of the religion and culture of Israel. But, as stated in Galatians 3:22-25, Christians are no longer bound by these Jewish laws. By faith we live in Jesus Christ, not in Leviticus. To be sure, ethical concerns apply to all cultures and peoples in every age. Such concerns were ultimately reflected by Jesus Christ, who said nothing about homosexuality, but a great deal about love, justice, mercy and faith.

The New Testament – Scripture Study

Romans 1:24-27

Most New Testament books, including the four Gospels, are silent on same-sex acts, and Paul is the only author who makes any reference to the subject. The most negative statement by Paul regarding same-sex acts occurs in Romans 1:24-27 where, in the context of a larger

argument on the need of all people for the gospel of Jesus Christ, certain homosexual behavior is given as an example of the "uncleanness" of idolatrous Gentiles.

This raises the question: Does this passage refer to *all* homosexual acts, or to certain homosexual behavior known to Paul's readers? The book of Romans was written to Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, who would have been familiar with the infamous sexual excesses of their contemporaries, especially Roman emperors. They would also have been aware of tensions in the early Church regarding Gentiles and observance of the Jewish laws, as noted in Acts 15 and Paul's letter to the Galatians. Jewish laws in Leviticus mentioned male same-sex acts in the context of idolatry.

The homosexual practices cited in *Romans 1:24-27* were believed to result from idolatry and are associated with some very serious offenses as noted in *Romans 1*. Taken in this larger context, it should be obvious that such acts are significantly different from loving, responsible lesbian and gay relationships seen today.

What is "Natural"?

Significant to Paul's discussion is the fact that these "unclean" Gentiles exchanged that which was "natural" for them, *physin*, in the Greek text, for something "unnatural," *para physin*. In *Romans 11:24*, God acts in an "unnatural" way, *para physin*, to accept the Gentiles. "Unnatural" in these passages does not refer to violation of so-called laws of nature, but rather implies action contradicting one's own nature. In view of this, we should observe that it is "unnatural," *para physin*, for a person today with a lesbian or gay sexual orientation to attempt living a heterosexual lifestyle.

Reference to Lesbianism?

Romans 1:26 is the only statement in the Bible with a possible reference to lesbian behavior, although the specific intent of this verse is unclear. Some authors have seen in this passage a reference to women adopting a dominant role in heterosexual relationships. Given the repressive cultural expectations placed on women in Paul's time, such a meaning may be possible.

The Other Verses...

I Corinthians 6:9

Any consideration of New Testament statements on same-sex acts must carefully view the social context of the Greco-Roman culture in which Paul ministered. Prostitution and pederasty (sexual relationships of adult men with boys) were the most commonly known male same-sex acts.

In I Corinthians 6:9, Paul condemns those who are "*effeminate*" and "*abusers of themselves with mankind*," as translated in the King James version. Unfortunately, some new translations are worse, rendering these words "homosexuals." Recent scholarship unmasks the homophobia behind such mistranslations.

The first word - *malakos*, in the Greek text-which has been translated "effeminate" or "soft," most likely refers to someone who lacks discipline or moral control. The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament but never with reference to sexuality.

The second word, *Arsenokoitai*, occurs once each in I Corinthians and I Timothy (1:10), but nowhere else in other literature of the period. It is derived from two Greek words, one meaning, "*males*" and the other "*beds*", a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Other Greek words were commonly used to describe homosexual behavior but do not appear here. The larger context of I Corinthians 6 shows Paul extremely concerned with prostitution, so it is very possible he was referring to male prostitutes. But many experts now attempting to translate these words have reached a simple conclusion: their precise meaning is uncertain.

Scripture Study Conclusion...No Law Against Love

The rarity with which Paul discusses any form of same-sex behavior and the ambiguity in references attributed to him make it extremely unsound to conclude any sure position in the New Testament on homosexuality, especially in the context of loving, responsible relationships. Since any arguments must be made from silence, it is much more reliable to turn to great principles of the Gospel taught by Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do not judge others, lest you be judged. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is love . . . against such there is no law.

One thing is abundantly clear, as Paul stated in Galatians 5:14:

*"...the whole Law is fulfilled in one statement,
'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'".*

Insights from Other Bible Scholars

"The homosexuality the New Testament opposes is the pederasty of the Greco-Roman culture; the attitudes toward pederasty and, in part, the language used to oppose it are informed by the Jewish background."
*Robin Scroggs, Professor of Biblical Theology,
Union Theological Seminary, New York City.*

"One cannot be absolutely certain that the two key words in I Corinthians 6:9 are meant as references to male homosexual behavior."

Victor Paul Furnish, Professor of New Testament, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas.

"The strongest New Testament argument against homosexual activity is intrinsically immoral has been derived traditionally from Romans 1:26, where this activity is indicated as *para physin*. The normal English translation for this has been 'against nature.' Two interpretations can be justified concerning what Paul meant by the phrase. It could refer to the individual pagan, who goes beyond his own sexual appetites in order to indulge in new sexual pleasure. The second possibility is that *physis* refers to the 'nature' of the chosen people who were forbidden by Levitical law to have homosexual relations."

John J. McNeill, Adjunct Professor of Psychology, Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

"A close reading of Paul's discussion of homosexual acts in Romans 1 does not support the common modern interpretation of the passage. Paul did not deny the existence of a distinction between clean and unclean and even assumed that Jewish Christians would continue to observe the purity code. He refrained. However, from identifying physical impurity with sin or demanding that Gentiles adhere to that code."

William Countryman, Professor of New Testament, Church Divinity School of Pacific, Berkeley.

"The Hebrew word 'toevah,' here translated 'abomination,' does not usually signify something intrinsically evil, like rape or theft (discussed elsewhere in Leviticus), but something which is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation, both of which are prohibited in these same chapters."

John Boswell, Professor of History, Yale University, New Haven.

Helpful Reading:

The following books are highly recommended for those wishing to carefully study issues of homosexuality as related to the Christian Church:

Boswell, John. *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Countryman, Louis William. [*Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church.*](#) Morehouse Publishing, 2001.

Furnish, Victor Paul (1979). *The Moral Teaching of Paul.* Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Goss, Robert E and Mona West, ed *Take Back the Word*. Pilgrim Press, 2000.

Hanks, Tom. *God So Loved the Third World*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001.

Helminiak, Daniel A. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 2000.

Heyward, Carter. *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic As Power and the Love of God*. Harpercollins 1989.

Horner, Tom (1978). *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

McNeill, John J. (1988). *The Church and the Homosexual*. Boston: Beacon Press. Orig. pub. 1976/

Scroggs, Robin (1983). *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Discuss what you learned in this lesson.

What was "Good News"?

What was empowering?

What was comforting?

What was challenging?

Lesson 3

(Rev. Mona West is co-editor of Take Back the Word and The Queer Bible Commentary. She was the Academic Dean of the Samaritan Institute and is also a Spiritual Director. She holds a PhD in Old Testament Studies from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary)

The Bible and Homosexuality **By Rev. Mona West, Ph.D.**

Lesbians and gay men face discrimination because of societal attitudes. Unfortunately, these attitudes are often taught by churches and, sadly, the Bible is frequently used as a weapon to “bash” lesbians and gays. It is important to remember that such hurtful things are not a reflection of Christ, or the way God wants the church to be, or even what the Bible really says.

Only a small number of passages in the entire Bible reference same-sex sexual activity (six out of sixty-six books of the entire Bible). Obviously this topic was not of great concern to the biblical writers. Yet these verses have been used to justify hatred, condemnation and exclusion of God’s lesbian and gay children.

The word ‘homosexuality’ is a modern term and did not exist during biblical times. Biblical writers had no concept of sexual orientation or sexual development as we understand those today. Therefore, passages that reference same-sex sexual activity should not be seen as comprehensive statements concerning homosexuality, but instead should be viewed in the context of what the ancient world that produced the Bible understood about sexual activity.

Sexuality in the Mediterranean World

Biblical scholars have employed the social sciences to study the relational and gender patterns of the ancient Mediterranean world—the world that produced the Bible. Professor Mary Tolbert summarizes that research with the following words:

The single most important concept that defines sexuality in the ancient Mediterranean world, whether we are talking about the kingdoms of Egypt or of Assyria or whether we are talking about the later kingdoms of Greece and Rome, is that approved sexual acts never occurred between social equals. Sexuality, by definition, in ancient Mediterranean societies required the combination of dominance and submission. This crucial social and political root metaphor of dominance and submission as the definition of sexuality rested upon a physical basis that assumed every sex act required a penetrator and someone who was

penetrated. Needless to say, this definition of sexuality was entirely male—not surprising in the heavily patriarchal societies of the Mediterranean.

In these societies sexual acts between men did happen, but they happened in order to show dominance of one group of men or a man over another, especially during times of war. It was not uncommon for men who had conquered a foreign army to rape them in order to show they were dominant and of a higher status.

The Story of Sodom in Genesis 19

This understanding is helpful when we read the story of the city of Sodom, Lot, and the visitors (or angels). The men of Sodom want to 'know' (*yadah* - a Hebrew word that can mean sexual intercourse) the foreigners who have come to Lot's house. In essence they want to *rape* them in order to show their social and cultural dominance over them.

This story is not a condemnation of homosexuality, but is a story about rape and inhospitality. In other biblical texts (Ezekiel 16:49, Luke 17:28-29) Sodom's 'sin' is not identified as homosexuality, rather, their sins were pride, failure to help the poor, and lack of hospitality to foreigners.

Leviticus

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."
(18:22)

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them."
(20:13)

These verses are part of the Holiness Code in the Old Testament book of Leviticus (chapters 17-26) that attempted to spell out ways the people of Israel would act differently than their Mediterranean neighbors. In light of the previously mentioned sexual practices of Israel's neighbors, it becomes clear that this prohibition in Leviticus was an attempt to preserve the internal harmony of Jewish male society by not allowing them to participate in anal intercourse as a form of expressing or gaining social and political dominance. These verses in no way prohibit, nor do they even speak, to loving, caring sexual relationships between people of the same gender.

The Writings of the Apostle Paul

"So do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

“The law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:9-11).

There are two major issues to consider when one approaches these passages: translation and sexual practices of Greek culture. A comparison of these verses in several translations of the Bible indicates that there is some confusion about how to translate two Greek words in these lists of vices Paul has enumerated. The two words are *arsenokoitai* which is rendered in various translations as “homosexuals,” “sodomites,” “child molesters,” or “perverts” and *malakoi* which is rendered in various translations as “catamites,” “the effeminate,” or “boy prostitutes.”

These Greek words are difficult to translate in the context of these passages. *Malakoi* is a common term and means “soft.” It can refer to clothing (Matthew 11:8) or moral matters, meaning “undisciplined.” *Arsenokoitai* is a rare word and is made up of *arseno* meaning “man,” and *koitai* meaning “bed, lying, or having sex with.” When put together the word may mean “male prostitutes.”

When these words are placed in the context of Greek culture in which Paul was writing, the passages have very specific meanings. As we have seen earlier, the Mediterranean world had a definition of sexuality that was based on dominance/submission and unequal status. Greek culture fine tuned that definition with regard to status. Proper sexual relations occurred between people whose status was unequal. In addition there was a practice in ancient Greek culture known as pederasty in which younger men were socialized and educated through a close relationship with an older man. These older men were the boys’ (age 12 or 13) patrons and, often, their lovers. These relationships were seen as the key to raising up the next generation of city leaders and there were strict rules about how long the relationship should last and the roles of families within these relationships. Evidently there was some abuse happening in these relationships and young boys were being exploited and kept by the patron well after the boy had grown into adulthood (which would have made him an equal, hence violating the code of sex only among unequals).

These abusive relationships are what the apostle Paul is referencing, not mutually loving and caring relationships between people of the same sex.

Romans 1:26-27

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

By now it should be clear that these verses must be read in the cultural context of the Mediterranean world that understood socially acceptable sexual behavior to happen only one way: among unequals with the dominant partner always an adult male.

It is also important to read these verses in Romans within their larger context. At the beginning of his letter to the church in Rome (where he had not yet visited) Paul was attempting to lay out for the Roman church his theology of grace (all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; but are justified by the gift of grace in Christ Jesus, 3:23). He is writing to a Jewish and Gentile audience. In chapter one he tries to demonstrate the Gentiles' need for God by pointing out behaviors that keep them alienated from God. In chapter two he does the same thing for his Jewish audience.

Paul's reference to natural and unnatural sexual acts must be taken in light of Mediterranean sexuality. He is not attempting to give an ethical teaching concerning homosexuality. He is trying to meet his Gentile audience on their own terms; using the example of some people who are not upholding the dominant/submissive model as an opportunity to talk about all persons' need for the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Issues of Biblical Authority

When dealing with matters of biblical interpretation one always needs to keep in mind the role of the authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice. While the Bible is an important witness to the relationship between God and humanity, it is not the ultimate revelation of God—Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is. We must guard against what some scholars have called bibliolatry—making an idol out of scripture.

One way to guard against bibliolatry is to realize that while the Bible may be at the center of matters of faith, it must also be in 'conversation' with tradition, experience and reason. These four sources of faith have become known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral, so named after their originator John Wesley, founder of the Methodist heritage.

We must read and interpret scripture with the aid of the history and tradition of the Christian church. We must also bring reason—philosophical and rational thought--to bear on applications of scripture to

real life situations. And last and most importantly, scripture must be weighed alongside human experience—especially the experience of God’s grace.

It is time we stopped making an idol out of the Bible. It is time we bring philosophical and rational thought—especially what the sciences have told us about sexual orientation and identity development—into conversation with the Bible. It is time we listen to the experiences of God’s gay and lesbian children who know with all their hearts that God has created them just as they are.

Resources

Brooten, Bernadette (1996). *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Helminiak, Daniel (1994). *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press.

Scroggs, Robin (1983). *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Tolbert, Mary (2002). “*Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: Biblical Texts in Historical Contexts*.” Paper delivered at Lancaster School of Theology, published on the web at www.clgs.org.

Wink, Walter (1999). *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Discuss what you learned in this lesson.

What was “Good News”?

What was empowering?

What was comforting?

What was challenging?

Have you ever made the bible an “idol”? In what ways? How might you re-examine your relationship with scripture?

What points in this lesson were made in previous lessons? Does it help to hear them repeated?

Lesson 4

(Rev. Nancy Wilson is the Presiding Elder & Moderator of Metropolitan Community Churches. She is also the author of Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible. Rev. Wilson holds a Master of Divinity degree from Ss. Cyril & Methodius Seminary and is a Doctor of Ministry candidate at the Episcopal Divinity School)

OUR STORY TOO

Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with "New Eyes" by Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson

"While it is true that the Bible was written in the context of patriarchal, heterosexual cultures, the message and story of God's unconditional love in Christ can also be the "power of salvation" for our GLBT community...The new Christian community in Acts includes childless widows, former prostitutes, social outcasts, celibates, married people, eunuchs, blacks, Jews, and Gentiles. Those previously excluded were now fulfilling the promise of Isaiah 56: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all the people'...The stories of two prominent same-sex couples in the Scriptures provide gay men and lesbians with Biblical models of committed love in stressful circumstances."

*~ Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, *Our Story Too**

From evaluating cultural influences on Biblical thought, to analyzing the cultural influences on the original texts, to seeking the proofs of same-sex relationships in scripture, Rev. Elder Wilson calls on the GLBT communities to reclaim the Bible! First released in 1992, this three-part series has been re-edited and re-released for today's audience.

Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with "New Eyes"

Part 1

Reading the Bible with "New Eyes"

Most modern gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people are either afraid of the Bible or unfamiliar with its content, thinking that the Bible has only bad news for them. While it is true that the Bible was written in the context of patriarchal, heterosexual cultures, the message

and story of God's unconditional love in Christ can also be the "power of salvation" for our GLBT community.

A bold, proactive reading of the Bible offers new life for GLBT individuals, their families, and their friends. Consensus is growing among respected scholars of Scripture that the Bible does not condemn such relationships. Contemporary GLBT Christians have focused on proving that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality. It is time to move beyond defending this position. It is not enough for the Bible simply not to condemn homosexuality. We must be able to say,

"Yes, it is..." **"Our Story, Too!"**

Opening Doors of Ancient "closets" ...

Liberation theology and feminist biblical critique have shown that the Bible, in order to empower all people, must be read with new eyes from the vantage point of oppressed peoples. When we read the Biblical stories through today's experience, they come alive with new relevance. What if we just assume that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people were always in the Bible? Their historical counterparts followed Moses and Miriam in the Exodus, and walked with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee! We are everywhere, and always have been, even when silent and closeted about their sexuality.

It is time to boldly liberate some Biblical gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender characters and stories from ancient "closets". Centuries of silence in Biblical commentaries and reference books must now be broken by a passionate search for Biblical truth about sexuality. Does the Bible include references, to, or stories about, GLBT people consistent with what historians and anthropologists know about sexuality during Biblical times? The answer is, "Yes!". Some stories are incontrovertible. Others are compellingly gay and lesbian. And, there are other stories curiously suggestive of same-sex relationships. All of these can empower us to joyfully embrace the Bible.

What difference does it make?

What difference does it make for GLBT people to dare see themselves in the Bible? It helps to know the people of the Bible as they were, not unrealistically assuming they were all heterosexual. In these references to GLBT individuals, there is no condemnation, and no cross-referencing to homophobic interpretations of the story of Sodom or Levitical law. It invites our communities to fearlessly read the Bible, to apply its healing and empowering message to their lives.

**The GLBT Family in the Bible...
Founding and Following the Work of Jesus**

Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with "New Eyes"

Part 2

Foundations - God Blesses the "Barren Ones"

One place to begin exploring GLBT history in the Bible is with the Biblical concepts of immortality. The Hebrew scriptures are not very clear about any consistent concept of life after death. The primary way that one would achieve immortality was through one's heirs. The worst fate that could befall someone was to be "cut off" from one's people. This could happen by being exiled for certain crimes, by public execution, or by dying without leaving any children. Prosperity and having many children were viewed as dual signs of God's favor. (Psalm 127:3-5; 128:3-6).

In this context, female barrenness was considered a curse. A woman's worth was connected to her ability to give her husband children. The Bible is full of stories of women who desperately prayed to God to "open their wombs" (Psalm 113:9; Genesis 30:1; I Samuel 1:10). Barrenness became a metaphor used by the prophets to describe Israel's pitiful condition when they felt abandoned or cursed by God. Isaiah 54 begins with a poignant recasting of this metaphor. Isaiah's prophetic message then revokes the curse of barrenness and Israel becomes a barren woman with many children. Two chapters later, Isaiah uses the term "dry tree" (a female image of barrenness) for eunuchs. It also associated the term "*cut off*" with eunuchs. The term "*eunuch*" in Isaiah 56 is possibly a generic term used to include men and women who do not have children. The main reference in the law which may be the source of exclusion of eunuchs from the temple is Deuteronomy 23:1. Leviticus 21:17 says only those who are "unblemished can present themselves before God" This also excludes *eunuchs* who in ancient pagan religions were temple priests, and perhaps excludes children born of incestuous unions. Ultimately, Isaiah proclaims an inclusive covenant which promises the eunuchs and barren women *full participation* in the blessings of God and a "*name better than sons and daughters. . . an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.*"

Some People Are Born "Eunuchs"

So who were the eunuchs of Biblical times? The word, "eunuch," seems to refer to a male who has been castrated (often to render him "*safe*" for female royalty). However, there are references to eunuchs as court officials who were not necessarily physical eunuchs. Eunuchs referred to in Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, as well as in the New Testament, were not all castrated males. "Eunuch" is a more generic word that may well have included barren females, gay foreign court officials and magicians and priests, as well as castrated males. Castrated males were often functionally, if not constitutionally, homosexual.

Jesus speaks about three kinds of eunuchs: "For there are eunuchs who have been so by birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." (Matthew 19:12)

One might assume that eunuchs "made so by others" are those who have been castrated. Those who "*made themselves eunuchs*" are voluntary celibates. What of those, however, who were *born* eunuchs? Jesus makes it clear that heterosexual marriage is *not the norm* for everyone. This important comment by Jesus, which acknowledges lifestyles other than heterosexual marriage, applies to GLBT people.

Two stories of black eunuchs, both royal court officials, exemplify God's redemptive action. In Jeremiah 38, an Ethiopian eunuch saves the life of Jeremiah, and unmarried prophet. Jeremiah, in turn, brings a message of God to the king which describes how Jerusalem can be saved.

Another Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts 8, is baptized by the apostle Philip. The eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53 (awfully close to Isaiah 54 and 56!) a passage of messianic prophecy which describes the destiny of the Suffering Servant who would be "*cut off*" from the land of the living. The eunuch got the message that those who have been "*cut off*" are to be included. Hence his question, "*What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" Philip the apostle answers, "*Nothing!*"

The Book of Acts - Defining A Lesbian and Gay "Nation"

The book of Acts is an account of the early Church as it attempts to preach and live an "unhindered gospel" (Acts 28:31). Today, there is a great, global awakening of GLBT communities, who still need access to an "unhindered gospel." Two crucial stories are central to such a gospel: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10) and Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Both have their roots in the prophecies of Isaiah 56. Isaiah proclaims a future day when Gentiles and eunuchs will be included among the people of God, and their sacrifices will be "*acceptable*." The Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "*acceptable*" in Isaiah 56:7 also appears in Acts 10:35.

Ethnos Uncovered

In the story of Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius (a Gentile), Peter is given a divine revelation from God: ". . . God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God." (Acts 10:34-35). The word "nation" is actually the Greek word *ethnos* from which we derive our word "*ethnic*." The term refers to a race, culture or people. Thus Peter learns that among every

race, culture or people those who fear God and do what is right are eligible for baptism.

Is the GLBT community just a political lobby for homosexual behavior, or is it an ethnos? Certainly, there are heterosexual people who engage in homosexual sex, and GLBT people who may never have sex at all. Are GLBT people a kind of behavior, or a kind of people for whom homoerotic attraction is but one characteristic? An ethnos could be defined by a common history, vocabulary, culture, institutions (schools, libraries, clubs, churches, synagogues, social organizations, businesses) heroes, political leaders, scholars, values, and the ability to recognize each other even when submerged in the dominant culture. If these constitute an ethnos, GLBT people are included in the word "*nation*" used in Acts 10. What evidence of GLBT *ethnos* exists in the Bible? This is a complex detective story made more difficult by thousands of years of heterosexist bias in secular history and Biblical scholarship.

Jesus Lived an Alternate Lifestyle

Relationships of Jesus in the gospels differ greatly from the contemporary so-called nuclear family. Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha. What drew Jesus to this very non-traditional family group of a bachelor brother living with two spinster sisters? Two barren women and a eunuch are Jesus' adult family of choice. Are we to assume they were all celibate heterosexuals? What if Mary and Martha were not sisters but called each other "sister" as did most lesbian couples throughout recorded history?

John's gospel refers no less than eight times to the "one whom Jesus loved", also called the "*beloved disciple*". Scholars rarely explore that fact that Jesus obviously had a particularly close friendship with one man. Whether or not Jesus was gay, homophobia has silenced exploration of this relationship.

The Bible, in fact, knows almost nothing of the Post-Reformation ideal of monogamous, lifetime romantic heterosexual marriage. The Bible portrays marriage in terms of property and business transactions, polygamy, extended family, tribal groupings, Levirate marriage and other lifestyles. The anti-marriage bias in the New Testament and sex-negative emphasis of early theologians is well known by historians and students of human sexuality.

The new Christian community in Acts includes childless widows, former prostitutes, social outcasts, celibates, married people, eunuchs, blacks, Jews, and Gentiles. Those previously excluded were now fulfilling the promise of Isaiah 56: "*My house will be called a house of prayer for all the people.*"

Jesus Chooses a New "Family"

Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of Isaiah 53, was "cut off" from his people in two ways: he was executed as a criminal and died without heirs. He was a functional, if not physical, eunuch. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ redefined eternal life, dissociating it from the necessity to produce children.

Once, when confronted by his biological mother and brothers, Jesus pointed to his disciples as a new family, saying: "For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31)

'Same-Sex' Relationships in the Bible ***Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with "New Eyes"*** **Part 3**

The stories of two prominent same-sex couples in the Scriptures provide gay men and lesbians with Biblical models of committed love in stressful circumstances.

Ruth and Naomi

The Book of Ruth is a romantic novel but not about romance between Ruth and Boaz. Naomi is actually the central character, and Ruth is the "redeemer/hero." Boaz' relationship with Ruth, far from being romantic, is a matter of family duty and property.

This story contains the most moving promise of relational fidelity between two persons in all of the bible: "And Ruth said, 'Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whether thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God'". (Ruth 1:16)

Although used in heterosexual marriage ceremonies for years, this is a vow between two women! When their husbands die in battle, Ruth makes this vow to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Ruth marries Boaz, a close relative, and redeems Naomi's place in her own family, also bearing a child for Naomi. Did Ruth and Naomi have a lesbian relationship? There's no way to know, but it is clear the two women had a lifelong, passionate, committed relationship celebrated in Scripture.

United in a Covenant of Love...David and Jonathan

Another story, that of David and Jonathan, occurs in a time when male warrior/lovers were common and considered noble.

This tragic triangle of passion, jealousy and political intrigue between Saul, Jonathan and David, leads to one of the most direct expressions of same-sex love in the Bible: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women." (II Samuel 1:26)

The author is clearly attuned to David's classic male beauty (I Samuel 16:12) in this story of love and loyalty marked by romance (I Samuel 18:1-5), secret meetings (I Samuel 20:1-23; 35-42), kissing and weeping (I Samuel 20:41), refusal to eat (I Samuel 28:32-34), and the explicit warrior/lover covenant which David keeps after Jonathan's death (I Samuel 20:12-17; 42).

One cannot read this account without discerning that Jonathan was the love of David's life. Centuries of homophobic Biblical interpretations have kept them in the closet too long!

Homosexuality and the Bible: Some Important Questions

Is that all there is? A few prophecies about barrenness and eunuchs and only two same-sex couples? There is more, and scholars need to explore the possibilities:

- Are the eunuchs in the Joseph story (Genesis 39-45) and the Book of Esther also gay, residing in royal courts, and rescuing God's leaders?
- In the parable of the woman who has lost a coin (Luke 15), she had ten and lost one. Are gays and lesbians a lost coin joyfully rediscovered in our day? Gays and lesbians are now estimated to be ten percent of the population. Are they a tithe of humanity? Are they the leaven in the loaf of every culture?
- A centurion petitions Jesus for the healing of a servant who is dear to him (Luke 7). The Greek word in Matthew 8 is *pais* meaning "*slave boy*", which commonly described a homosexual relationship in those times. Why did Jesus praise the faith of the centurion but not condemn his lifestyle?
- Paul, the apostle, had no sympathy for heterosexuals who couldn't control their sexual desires. At the same time, his stormy relational life was centered around men, such as Timothy, Barnabas and Silas. Were his tirades against co-workers and churches, and his tireless missionary zeal partly a way to suppress his homosexuality?
- In the story of the rich young ruler (Mark 10), "Jesus looking upon him loved him." What is the connection of embodied spirituality and this "love" for a needy stranger? What studies have been done about the eight times Jesus was said to "love" someone? How was Jesus' particular "love for individuals related to his sexuality?
- What of Lydia (Acts 16), the independent, Gentile businesswoman, seller of purple and the first European Christian? There is no mention of her husband, or children, yet she is noted to have led a women's group to whom Paul preached. Was Lydia a lesbian?
- The color purple is often used in connection with royalty, or suffering and passion, or transformation and magic. It is the color which Jesus wore to the cross. Does the color purple also have gay and lesbian connotations in the bible and in Christian liturgical tradition?

Footnotes to "Our Story Too..."

- 1) Consultation of the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, on "Biblical Issues and Homosexuality," Unpublished papers, 1987. Six infamous passages in the Bible are used against gays and lesbians—all of which must be taken out of context when directed against them. A thorough, yet concise, commentary on these passages is provided in the pamphlet, *Homosexuality: Not a Sin, Not a Sickness*, by Rev. Donald Eastman, referenced below.
- 2) This section, "Same-Sex Relationships," is indebted to Tom Horner's *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1978.
- 3) This section, "Important Questions," is indebted to Judy Grahn's *Another Mother Tongue*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984.

Further Reading:

The following sources are recommended for those wishing to more carefully study related issues:

Helminiak, Daniel A. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 2000.

Goss, Robert E and Mona West, ed *Take Back the Word*. Pilgrim Press, 2000

Boswell, John. *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Countryman, Louis William. *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*. Morehouse Publishing, 2001.

Heyward, Carter. *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic As Power and the Love of God*. HarperCollins 1989.

Discuss what you learned in this lesson.

What was "Good News"?

What was empowering?

What was comforting?

What was challenging?

Lesson 5

FAQs from PFLAG (Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays):
www.pflag.org

How are sexual orientation and gender identity determined?

No one knows exactly how sexual orientation and gender identity determined. However, experts agree that it is a complicated matter of genetics, biology, psychological and social factors. For most people, sexual orientation and gender identity are shaped at any early age. While research has not determined a cause, homosexuality and gender variance are not the result of any one factor like parenting or past experiences. It is never anyone's "fault" if they or their loved one grows up to be GLBT.

If you are asking yourself why you or your loved one is GLBT, consider asking yourself another question: Why ask why? Does your response to a GLBT person depend on knowing why they are GLBT? Regardless of cause, GLBT people deserve equal rights and to be treated fairly.

Is there something wrong with being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?

No.

There have been people in all cultures and times throughout human history who have identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT). Homosexuality is not an illness or a disorder, a fact that is agreed upon by both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1974. Being transgender or gender variant is not a disorder either, although Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) is still listed in the DSM of the American Psychiatric Association. Being GLBT is as much a human variation as being left-handed - a person's sexual orientation and gender identity are just another piece of who they are. There is nothing wrong with being GLBT - in fact, there's a lot to celebrate.

Discriminatory laws, policies and attitudes that persist in our schools, workplaces, places of worship and larger communities, however, are wrong and hurt GLBT people and their loved ones. PFLAG works to make sure that GLBT people have full civil rights and can live openly, free from discrimination and violence.

Can gay people change their sexual orientation or gender identity?

No – and efforts to do so aren't just unnecessary – they're damaging.

Religious and secular organizations do sponsor campaigns and studies claiming that GLBT people can change their sexual orientation or gender identity because there is something wrong. PFLAG believes that it is our anti-GLBT attitudes, laws and policies that need to change, not our GLBT loved ones.

These studies and campaigns suggesting that GLBT people can change are based on ideological biases and not peer-reviewed solid science. No studies show proven long-term changes in gay or transgender people, and many reported changes are based solely on behavior and not a person's actual self-identity. The American Psychological Association has stated that scientific evidence shows that reparative therapy (therapy which claims to change GLBT people) does not work and that it can do more harm than good.

How does someone know they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?

Some people say that they have "felt different" or knew they were attracted to people of the same sex from the time they were very young. Some transgender people talk about feeling from an early age that their gender identity did not match parental and social expectations. Others do not figure out their sexual orientation or gender identity until they are adolescents or adults. Often it can take a while for people to put a label to their feelings, or people's feelings may change over time.

Understanding our sexuality and gender can be a lifelong process, and people shouldn't worry about labeling themselves right away. However, with positive images of GLBT people more readily available, it is becoming easier for people to identify their feelings and come out at earlier ages. People don't have to be sexually active to know their sexual orientation - feelings and emotions are as much a part of one's identity. The short answer is that you'll know when you know.

Should I talk to a loved one about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity before the person talks to me?

It's seldom appropriate to ask a person, "Are you gay?" Your perception of another person's sexual orientation (gay or straight) or gender identity (male or female) is not necessarily what it appears.

No one can know for sure unless the person has actually declared that they are gay, straight, bisexual, or transgender. PFLAG recommends creating a safe space by showing your support of GLBT issues on a non-personal level. For example, take an interest in openly discussing and learning about topics such as same-sex marriage or GLBT rights in the

workplace. Learn about GLBT communities and culture. Come out as an ally, regardless of if your friend or loved one is GLBT.

How do I come out to my family and friends?

There are many questions to consider before coming out. Are you comfortable with your sexuality and gender identity/expression? Do you have support? Can you be patient? What kind of views do your friends and family have about homosexuality and gender variance? Are you financially dependent on your family? Make sure you have thought your decision through, have a plan and supportive people you can turn to. Just as you needed to experience different stages of acceptance for yourself, family and loved ones may need to go through a similar process.

PFLAG was founded because of the unconditional love of parents for their gay children. Your loved ones will need time to adjust to your news, the same way you may have needed time to come to terms with yourself. However, true acceptance is possible and happens every day, especially with education and support.

Can gay people have families?

Yes! GLBT people can and do have families. Same-sex couples do form committed and loving relationships. In the United States many same-sex couples choose to celebrate their love with commitment ceremonies or civil unions, although these couples are not offered the rights and benefits of marriage. More and more GLBT couples are also raising children together, although state laws on adoption and foster parenting vary. And of course, many GLBT people have the support of the loving families they were born into, or the families that they have created with their other friends and loved ones. As the saying goes, all it takes is love to make a family.

How can I reconcile my or my loved one's sexual orientation with my faith?

This is a difficult question for many people. Learning that a loved one is GLBT can be a challenge if you feel it is at odds with your faith tradition. However, being GLBT does not impact a person's ability to be moral and spiritual any more than being heterosexual does. Many GLBT people are religious and active in their own faith communities. It is up to you to explore, question and make choices in order to reconcile religion with homosexuality and gender variance. For some this means working for change within their faith community, and for others it means leaving it.

Why should I support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender equality?

GLBT rights are not special rights. PFLAG works to achieve equal civil rights for all people, including our GLBT loved ones. Our GLBT children, friends and family members deserve the same rights as our straight ones. However, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is still legal in many states, a GLBT person can be fired from their job simply because of who they love or how they express their gender, same-sex couples cannot legally be married in the majority of states in the United States, GLBT youth face constant harassment and abuse in schools across the country, and it is clear that the road to full equality and acceptance is a long one.

Discuss what you learned in this lesson.

What was “Good News”?

What was empowering?

What was comforting?

What was challenging?

Lesson 6

Q&A with Daniel Helminiak from the Dignity USA website
(www.dignityusa.org).

(Dr. Helminiak is a former Roman Catholic priest with a PhD in Systematic Theology and another PhD in Psychology. Daniel Helminiak is the author of *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*)

Q: What was the point of the Bible texts if not to condemn homosexuality?

A: It is not easy to summarize briefly the body of research on homosexuality in the Bible. But these are the interpretations that some scholars are proposing:

- The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 is about offense against the sacred duty of hospitality. That is how Ezekiel 16:48-49 and Wisdom 9:13-14 interpret this text. The attempted male rape only heightens the atrocity of this offense.
- Leviticus 18:22 does forbid male-male sex as an "abomination." But the word simply means an impurity or a religious taboo — like eating pork. As in the case of Catholics who used to be forbidden under pain of mortal sin to eat meat on Friday, the offense was not in the act itself but in the betrayal of one's religion. The ancient Jews were to avoid practices common among the unclean Gentiles.
- Romans 1:27 mentions men having relations with men. But the terms used to describe them are "dishonorable" and "shameless." These refer deliberately to social disapproval, not to ethical condemnation. Moreover, according to Paul's usage, different from the prevalent Stoic philosophy of the day, *para physin* ("unnatural") would best be translated "atypical" or "beyond the ordinary." So it bears no reference to natural law. And it can imply no ethical condemnation because in Romans 11:24 God is said to act *para physin*. Paul sees gay sex as an impurity (see Rm. 1:24), just like uncircumcision or eating forbidden foods. He mentions it to make the main point of his letter, that purity requirements of the Jewish Law are not relevant in Christ Jesus. See L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10 list *arsenokoitai* among those who will be excluded from the Reign of God. This obscure term has been translated "homosexuals" but its exact meaning is debated. It certainly does not include women but only some kind of male sexual offenders. If it does refer to men having sex with men — which is dubious — it must be interpreted in light of the abuse and licentiousness commonly

associated with male-male sex in the Roman Empire. See Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*.

- Finally, Genesis 1-3 shows Adam and Eve created for mutual companionship and procreation. These accounts use the most standard of human relationships to teach a religious lesson. The point is the love and wisdom of God, who made all things good and wills us no evil. Nothing suggests the biblical authors intended a lesson on sexual orientation.

Q: Hasn't there been constant opposition to homosexuality throughout Christian history?

A: Recent and detailed historical scholarship questions that claim. Although one could find some opposing voice in every century, there was no common opposition to homosexuality in Christian Europe until the late 12th century except for a period around the collapse of the Roman Empire. Indeed, for nearly two centuries after Christianity had become the state religion, Christian emperors in Eastern cities not only tolerated but actually taxed gay prostitution. In 7th century Visigoth Spain, a series of six national church councils refused to support the ruler's legislation against homogenital acts. By the 9th century almost every area in Christian Europe had local law codes, including detailed sections on sexual offenses; none outside of Spain forbade homogenital acts. By the High Middle Ages, a gay subculture thrived, as in Greco-Roman times. A body of gay literature was standard discussion material at courses in the medieval universities where clerics were educated.

Opposition to homosexuality, as in Augustine and Chrysostom, rested on reasons unacceptable today: "natural-law" arguments based on beliefs about supposed sexual practices among hares, hyenas, and weasels; a philosophical Stoicism that was suspicious of any sexual enjoyment; a sexism that saw a degrading effeminacy in being the receptive partner in sex. All-out Christian opposition to homosexuality arose at a time when medieval society first began to oppress many minority groups: Jews, heretics, the poor, usurers. A campaign to stir up support for the Crusades by vilifying the Muslims with charges of homosexual rape also played a part in Christian Europe's change of attitude toward gay and lesbian sex. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.

Discuss what you learned in this lesson.

What was "Good News"?

What was empowering?

What was comforting?

What was challenging?

We suggest you visit www.religiousinstitute.org for additional sexuality/spirituality resources.