Homosexuality: Biblical Hermeneutical Conflicts and Contemporary Science

Benjamin Owens

In this essay I will examine the main arguments that both denounce and support homosexuality in the realms of biblical scripture, historical context, and contemporary scientific research. My argument is based on the position that a range of sexual orientations and gender identities are present in human beings as a natural part of God's creation. Sexual orientation and gender identity are commonly seen as two separate entities; however, I will include comments regarding transsexuals and inter-sexuals, since there is crossover in some of the argument.

Presently, the two main camps that either endorse or reject homosexuality are entirely polarized. This is largely because the argument is based in biblical scripture, which creates a precarious and circular debate since both sides have valid reasons for their polarizing views. There is also an under represented factor in this debate. The understanding of the diversity of sexual orientation is hindered by the hermeneutical lens that all Christians bring to the argument. Throughout history, Christians have frequently had "hang ups" about sex and sexuality and, according to Philip J. Wogaman, Augustine is responsible for linking "original sin" to sexual expression.\(^1\) To compound this, in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and 7:1-8 (NIV), Paul indicates that it is better to be entirely celibate than to marry. Taking this into consideration is important, because Christians are entering this debate with a particular view of their own sexual expression, which can subsequently be projected onto their beliefs regarding homosexuality.

Christians who argue that homosexuality is morally wrong base this on specific biblical scripture: Genesis 2:24 and 19:1-29, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Judges 19:22-30, Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. They also refer to the notion of "natural law" to contest homosexuality, which according to Wogaman, "... is represented as basing our judgements on what appears to be 'natural.'"\(^2\) When broaching the "Natural-Law" argument, the biblical verses used to support it are Genesis 2:24 and Romans 1:26-27. In Genesis 2:24, there is reference to heterosexual sex in the Adam and Eve story, and because there is no mention of homosexual relationships, heterosexual relationships are regarded as the only "natural" kind. In Romans 1:26-27, Robert A. J. Gagnon believes that when Paul is referring to "nature," he is referencing the "anatomical and procreative complementary of male and female" or "procreative capacity" for heterosexual couples.\(^3\)

However, if one uses the rationale of human reproduction as the only reason for sexual intercourse, then one could

\(^1\) Philip J. Wogaman, Moral Dilemmas: An Introduction To Christian Ethics (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2009), 84.

\(^2\) Wogaman, 30.

equally argue that an infertile heterosexual couple should abstain from sex, which is not a very appealing option. For example, in her essay *Homosexuality has Evolutionary Benefits to Individuals and Society*, Joan Roughgarden asserts that “sexual contact is not about reproduction.” She gives an example of a heterosexual couple, married for 50 years, with two children. The couple have had sex approximately 2500 times, yet they only made two babies. Roughgarden points out that this “sounds inefficient,” only if we regard sexual intercourse as being solely for the purpose of procreation rather than for the continued intimacy that keeps a marriage together in order to raise a family. This point weakens the justification for exclusive heterosexual sex, but it doesn’t fully address the dispute in Romans 1:26-27.

The argument in Romans 1:26-27 (against homosexual intercourse) and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (the judgement of homosexuals) is seemingly very clear. It is understandable why many stand by these passages as a foundation for their beliefs. Nevertheless, one must take into account who Paul was writing to, and place his letters in the proper historical context. The Romans had very different attitudes towards sex, relationships, and homosexual interaction compared to contemporary society. Roman homosexuality was not based on consensual, adult, loving relationships. In Roman society, sex slaves and child abuse were common place. Furthermore, men were expected to be dominant in all sexual encounters, or otherwise face mockery. Consequently, masculine sexual behaviour was used as a mode of control and conquest; this was apparent in the use of rape and prostitution in wartime. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians 6:9-10 he lists groups of people who “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Along with homosexual “offenders” he also lists “drunkards” and “prostitutes.” Firstly, it is not clear what he means by “offenders.” Perhaps this could be interpreted to mean rapists or child abusers; however, the meaning is unclear. Also, regarding “drunkards,” it is widely acknowledged in contemporary society that many people are predisposed to alcoholism and suffer greatly from addiction. It is also widely accepted that most people are drawn into prostitution and human trafficking because of poverty, and are in that position without consent. Taking this into consideration, one could assert that the objection to homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is connected to the culture and time in which it was written.

Cultural practices and historical context are also factors to consider when looking at the passages in Leviticus. Leviticus 18:22 is a commandment which reads, “do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman,” and the punishment in 20:13 states that “they must be put to death.” Again, this seems straightforward, especially because these passages are within Leviticus chapters 18, 19 and 20 which are referred to as “The Holiness Code.” As Gagnon points out, they are “... commands [that] have a definitive prescriptive or proscriptive (not just descriptive) function.”

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2. Roughgarden, 51.
4. Williams, 104.
7. Gagnon, 111.
the larger context for forbidden sexual relations," although, Gagnon concedes that the Leviticus argument “is not completely airtight.” The reason that these passages are not an entirely reliable resource for moral decision making (other than the fact that putting homosexuals to death is widely considered barbaric) is the fact that they are bracketed with commandments that are not appropriate for contemporary life. These include, in Leviticus 19:19, "do not plant your field with two different kinds of seeds" and "do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material,” as well as the death penalty for adulterers and those who curse their parents in Leviticus 20:9-10.

The harsh punishment of death and destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-29 are seen by some as an example of God’s wrath against homosexuals. Yet Anthony Weston points out that “rape” is in fact the common theme in this story, and “[as with the Romans], rape was a common practice of the time that was employed to humiliate enemies.” The story in Judges 19:22-30 is similar; it also contains gang rape and a protagonist whose moral values are unsound. Both of these stories display violence, rape, and a lack of morality, but those who relate these stories to homosexuality have a grave misunderstanding of both rape and sexual orientation. Some people would say that “the Bible and Christian tradition know nothing of homosexuality [and therefore] cannot be used to argue for or against the acceptance or ordination of homosexuals.”

It is difficult to find pro-homosexual content in the Bible. Even so, the fact that Jesus does not comment on homosexuality is an indicator that it was not a primary concern for him. Nonetheless, he does teach about love and being kind to others. For example, in Matthew 22:39, Jesus teaches to “love your neighbour as yourself,” and in Matthew 5:22, he warns against violent name calling. Jesus also mentions “eunuchs” in Matthew 19:10-12: “For some are eunuchs because they were born that way.” Although he is primarily referring to inter-sexuals, this passage points to a recognition of the range of possible sexual identities that human beings can experience from the time of birth onward.

In her book, The Sexual Spectrum, Olive Skene Johnson cites numerous, recent scientific studies on brain structure and behaviour. These detail the differences in the physical brain structures between homosexual men, heterosexual men, heterosexual women, lesbians, transsexual men and transsexual women. She assesses experiments on the use of brain hemisphere, which indicate cognitive differences between homosexual men and heterosexual men. She also looked at studies on handedness, in which 34% of homosexual men and 91% of lesbians were more likely to be left handed.

A major flaw within the biblical debate on sexual orientation is that there has been no room made for the variation or “spectrum” which is also present in all other areas of human experience. There is no one human the same as another and we all have a different thumb print or DNA. Yes, we have similarities, but there

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11 Gagnon, 113.
12 Gagnon, 120.
14 Scroggs, 12.
are so many variables that it seems ridiculous to argue within the limits of the Bible. Until both sides of the debate are willing to step out of the circular argument, stop finger pointing, and seek to understand the diversity of human beings in God's creation, the conflict will remain polarized.

*Benjamin Owens* is from the West of Scotland, but lived in Vancouver for several years, and is now based in Montreal. He is in his second year of the BFA Sculpture program, and the research for his current work includes theology and ethics.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


