

9 Biblical Boundaries for Same-Sex Attraction

Creation provides the foundation for what the bible says about human sexuality:

Genesis 2:23-24

23 Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

God's original design was a man and a woman, complementing each other in marriage. However, when our first parents rebelled, humanity fell from its original condition. The serpent asked, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (Gen 3:1). After Eve confirmed God's restriction not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the serpent said, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3.5). He wanted the first people to distrust God, to think he's holding them back, to imagine he's restricting them from enjoying something good. As a result Adam and Eve committed high treason against their maker in an act of open rebellion. Consequently "fallenness" contaminated them and their descendants ever since.

Romans 5.12, 17, 18, 19

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...17 because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man... 18 one trespass led to condemnation for all men...19 by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners...

Today we are imperfect mirrors stamped with God's image, but broken in all kinds of ways. Some of us are tempted with losing our tempers, others with adultery, still others with greed. Our fallen condition means that from birth we are out of tune with how God wants for us to think and live. Of course, redemption is available in Christ today and ultimately complete restoration will flood our world when the kingdom comes, healing everyone from sinful impulses, physical sickness, and relational dysfunction.

Although the incident in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) is the first mention of same-sex desire, it's not particularly helpful for figuring out the bible's position on homosexuality, since the men of the city wanted to rape the visitors. (Rape, of course, is condemned throughout scripture.) Instead, we'll begin in the Law of Moses with two texts in Leviticus.

Leviticus 18.22

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

abomination: something that causes disgust or hatred. Example: "Although once common, torture is now an *abomination* to the civilized peoples of the earth."³⁹

Lest you think abomination is a radical word, solely used for sexual acts, here are some other abominations in scripture:

³⁹ "abomination," 2017. *Merriam-Webster.com*, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abomination, accessed February 14, 2017.

- for Egyptians to eat with Hebrews (Gen 43:32)
- the gold and silver on idols (Deut 7:25)
- child sacrifice (Deut 12:31)
- eating unclean animals (Deut 14:3)
- practicing magic or sorcery (Deut 18:9-10)
- prideful eyes, lying, shedding innocent blood, devising wicked plans, running rapidly to evil, perjury, spreading strife among brothers (Prov 7:16)

Note that Leviticus 18:22 focuses on the act of a man lying with a man. We find no mention of attraction, orientation, or identity. Here's another important text:

Leviticus 20:10-15

10 "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. 11 If a man lies with his father's wife, he has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. 12 If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them. 13 If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. 14 If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and they shall be burned with fire, that there may be no depravity among you. 15 If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal.

Homosexual acts are not singled out as worse than any other sin. Though the death penalty might be shocking to us today, this was pretty typical for the Law of Moses for a whole variety of sins. Here same-sex relations are presented as just another sexual behavior that God forbids. We find no explanation as to why God says it's wrong other than that it's an abomination. Nonetheless, as Christians, we are no longer living under these laws (Col 2.16). Even so, the New Testament reiterates these prohibitions:

Romans 1.26-27

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

Once again the focus is on behavior (both for lesbian and gay sex). These acts are the result of dishonorable passions that go contrary to nature. Sometimes people claim this refers to heterosexuals who are going against their own nature, but the overall context of the chapter indicates that "nature" is talking about God's created order not one's sexual predilections. In fact, this whole section is about idolatry, which not only includes bowing to statues, but also refusing to honor God as creator. We should not think we have more wisdom than he does or worship the creature rather than the creator.

1 Timothy 1.8-10

8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine

Here we have a vice list. Note that homosexual acts are just one sin among many others. It is not the worst sin nor is it unforgiveable. Now we turn to the most important passage on this subject.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Some have argued Paul is arguing against participating in male temple prostitution in Corinth. However, there is no indication of that here. Others say he's condemning the Greek practice of pederasty. Yet, this overlooks the fact that by the first century, Corinth had long been a Roman city. The clue we need to interpret 1 Cor 6:9 lies in understanding the word *arsenokoites* (ἀρσενοκοίτης). This word is quite rare and Paul may have even coined the term himself, but I'm convinced he has Lev 20:13 in mind here.

arsenokoites (ἀρσενοκοίτης) is a compound word:

- *arsen* (ἄρσεν): a male
- *koite* (κοίτη): bed, sexual intercourse (Latin: coitus)

Leviticus 20:13

English Standard Version	If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.
Greek Septuagint	καὶ ὃς ἂν κοιμηθῆ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοίτην γυναικός βδέλυγμα ἐποίησαν ἀμφότεροι θανατούσθωσαν ἔνοχοί εἰσιν
Literal Translation	and whoever may sleep with a male (in the) bed of a woman; they have done an abomination; let them both be put to death; they are guilty

It's easy to see how *arsenos koiten* became *arsenokoiten*. So, Paul has Leviticus in mind, which focused on the sex act, not temple prostitutes or Greek cultural practices, though it would certainly include them as well. It's really important to understand how the Corinthians would have perceived same-sex relations so we don't just read in our modern ways of thinking about homosexuality. Coming to grips with the pair of words Paul used here will open us up to how the ancient Romans thought about this subject.

malakoi (μαλακοὶ from μαλακός): "(1) pertaining to being yielding to touch, soft, (2) pertaining to being passive in a same-sex relationship, effeminate especially of catamites,⁴⁰ of men and boys who are sodomized by other males in such a relationship"⁴¹

⁴⁰ The word "catamites" refers to the Greek practice of pederasty whereby a man (pederast) would engage in sexual activity with a boy (catamite). According to Wikipedia, "Pederasty in ancient Greece was a socially acknowledged erotic relationship between an adult male and a younger male usually in his teens."

⁴¹ Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (BDAG) Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, third ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

arsenokoitai (ἀρσενοκοῖται from ἀρσενοκοίτης): “a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex, a pederast...of one who assumes the dominant role in same-sex activity.”⁴²

Homosexuality in Ancient Rome (Wikipedia):

“The primary dichotomy of ancient Roman sexuality was active/dominant/masculine and passive/submissive/“feminised”. Roman society was patriarchal, and the freeborn male citizen possessed political liberty (*libertas*) and the right to rule both himself and his household (*familia*). “Virtue” (*virtus*) was seen as an active quality through which a man (*vir*) defined himself. The conquest mentality and “cult of virility” shaped same-sex relations. Roman men were free to enjoy sex with other males without a perceived loss of masculinity or social status, as long as they took the dominant or penetrative role. Acceptable male partners were slaves, prostitutes, and entertainers, whose lifestyle placed them in the nebulous social realm of *infamia*, excluded from the normal protections accorded a citizen even if they were technically free. Although Roman men in general seem to have preferred youths between the ages of 12 and 20 as sexual partners, freeborn male minors were strictly off limits, and professional prostitutes and entertainers might be considerably older...It was expected and socially acceptable for a freeborn Roman man to want sex with both female and male partners, as long as he took the penetrative role.”⁴³

You might be surprised to see how accepted homosexuality was in the ancient world. They didn’t think about sexuality the way we do. In light of their historical setting, what is 1 Corinthians saying? It’s saying not to participate in male to male sex whether in the active or passive roles.

Thus, the biblical witness is clear. Sex between people of same gender is a sin and it will keep those who practice it from eternal life if they don’t repent. However, this leaves us with a ton of questions. Can someone experience same-sex attraction and still be a Christian? How should we, as Christians, approach LGBTQ people? Is it fair that a same-sex attracted Christian has to remain celibate? What causes homosexuality? Can you change your sexual orientation? We’ll look at issues like these next.

⁴² BDAG.

⁴³ “Homosexuality in Ancient Rome,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_in_ancient_Rome, accessed February 13, 2017.

10 Questions about Gay and Lesbian Christians

Becket Cook's story can help us think through some really tough questions related to same-sex attraction.⁴⁴ Our culture pressures us through songs, movies, and stories about finding romance to believe singleness is inferior to relationships. It's easy to get the impression that to achieve human flourishing and experience humanity to its fullest, you need to get married (or at least be in a serious relationship). What does that say about Jesus? Are we saying he wasn't a full human being? Did Christ mope around, longing for romance? Did the great missionary Paul think singleness was a curse? Far from it, he wrote, "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am" (1 Cor 7.8). He goes on to extol the benefits of celibate singleness, including freedom from worrying about how to please a spouse and freedom to serve the Lord better. He concludes, "So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better...Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is [i.e. single]" (1 Cor 7:38, 40).

Question 1: How should same-sex attracted Christians think of themselves? Sam Allberry, author of *Is God Anti-Gay*, an excellent book, writes:

The gospel of Jesus is wonderful news for someone who experiences same-sex attraction. I used the term "same-sex attraction" just then because an immediate challenge is how I describe myself. In western culture today the obvious term for someone with homosexual feelings is "gay." But in my experience this often refers to far more than someone's sexual orientation. It has come to describe an identity and a lifestyle.

When someone says they're gay, or for that matter, lesbian or bisexual, they normally mean that, as well as being attracted to someone of the same gender, their sexual preference is one of the fundamental ways in which they see themselves. And it's for this reason that I tend to avoid using the term. It sounds clunky to describe myself as "someone who experiences same-sex attraction." But describing myself like this is a way for me to recognize that the kind of sexual attractions I experience are not fundamental to my identity. They are part of *what I feel* but are not *who I am* in a fundamental sense. I am far more than my sexuality.

Take another kind of appetite. I love meat. A plate without a slab of animal on it just doesn't feel right to me. But my love for meat does not mean I would want someone to think that 'carnivore' was the primary category through which to understand me. It is part of the picture, but does not get to the heart of who I am. So I prefer to talk in terms of being someone who experiences homosexual feelings, or same-sex attraction (SSA for short)."⁴⁵

Whether same-sex attracted Christians calls themselves gay Christian or not is not my focus here. What's important is that (1) they live chastely, and (2) their identity is in Christ not sexual orientation.

Question 2: Isn't the Christian sexual ethic harmful to gays and lesbians? Sometimes people say that Christian sexuality is narrow-minded and stifling. They argue that it's not healthy to deny who you really are or repress your identity. It can be psychologically harmful to believe you're defective or perverted.

⁴⁴ Check out his testimony at BIOLA on YouTube. Search for "Becket Cook BIOLA" or go to this link: [youtube.com/watch?v=qEgIHSOpqf4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEgIHSOpqf4)

⁴⁵ Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay* (Surrey, UK: The Good Book Company, 2015) pp. 10-11. I lean heavily on this book for answers to most of these questions. Naturally, his answers are more thorough than what I offer here.

Here we see a hidden assumption. The Christian critic reduces human flourishing to sexual expression as if your sexual appetites define you. However, if you find your identity in Christ, all the rest pales in comparison whether selfishness (which you must repress), laziness (which you should fight), outbursts of anger (which you should tamp down), and a thousand other sinful impulses. If you're part of the new humanity, created in Christ Jesus for good works, then you should strive to express outrageous cross-shaped love in anticipation of the coming kingdom. That's who you are. You're a kingdom citizen who happens to struggle with over-eating. You're a Christ-follower who is tempted with pornography. You're a child of God who experiences same-sex attraction. Sex is not the pinnacle of human experience, receiving God's love and sharing it with others is.

The old script of Christian intolerance and rejection of same-sex attraction is far from universal. For example, Allberry explains his own experience of coming out to his church:

"It has also now been a few years since I shared about the issue of sexuality publicly with my church family. Again, it has been a great blessing to have done so. There has been a huge amount of support—people asking how they can help and encourage me in this issue, and many saying that they are praying for me daily. Others have said how much it means to them that I would share something like this. It has also been a great encouragement to me that it does not seem to have defined how others see me. Aside from the expressions of love and support, business was back to normal very quickly."⁴⁶

Question 3: Is having same-sex feelings a sin? Here we need to distinguish between a temptation and a sin. Attraction, whether to the same sex or opposite sex is something we have to manage. If you are married, you are not free to follow your sexual attraction wherever it leads you. Likewise, single men and women need to take their sexual appetites captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Finding someone attractive and fantasizing about him or her are two totally different situations: the former is the temptation, the latter is the sin.

Question 4: Can someone go from gay to straight? Sometimes sexual appetites change. "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, for example, initially lived as a lesbian for many years before becoming a Christian. Today she is married to a man. You can read about her journey in her book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*. Jackie Hill Perry thought of herself in very masculine terms and engaged in multiple relationships with girls. However, after she turned her life over to Christ, she changed and now she's married to a man as well.⁴⁷ Although miracles may be preferable, sometimes therapy can also help. Mark Yarhouse has studied changes in same-sex attraction and found that some change along a spectrum is possible, but it is not universal and often not a full reversal of sexual orientation.⁴⁸ Thus, many just have to live with same-sex attraction. These people need our love and respect for their stand, not our badgering to get married or healed. Resources for gay Christians looking to remain single for Christ can be found at LivingOut.org.

Question 5: Do people choose to be gay or are they born gay? This is a debate I certainly cannot settle. Whether same-sex attraction is caused by nature or nurture is a moot point as far as how we treat people. Whatever the cause, if someone experience same-sex attraction, that's where he or she is at

⁴⁶ Allberry, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Watch her powerful testimony on YouTube, "My Life as a Stud."

⁴⁸ See chapter 5 in *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* by Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

now. So the pertinent question is not, “What went wrong?” so much as, “How do I follow Christ authentically now?”

Question 6: As a Christian, how should I treat gay people? Should I confront the issue right away? What if a gay couple comes to church? First of all, it’s a blessing anytime a couple starts coming. You might have an urge to set them straight with what the Bible says, but this is not a very helpful approach. By analogy, what would you do if a new couple comes and you find out they’re living together? Do you confront them immediately? Probably not. You know they need to hear the gospel first before they would even want to change. LGBTQ folks often enjoy tight-knit supportive communities. Do you think they’ll just give up everything because you tell them what the scriptures say on this issue? Sometimes people need to feel they belong before they are open to believe. If Christianity can provide a more compelling, more loving, more hospitable community than what they already have then they may consider Christ. Allberry says, “I would rather start at the center and work outwards, than start at the edge and work in.”⁴⁹ Only once living for God becomes more attractive to them than their current lifestyle will they consider changing.

Question 7: How can we support same-sex attracted folks who choose Christ over their sexual gratification? We need to honor singleness. Everything is not about marriage and parenting. The church can be a place to facilitate deep friendships.⁵⁰ Lastly, we can shut down homophobia when it rears its ugly head, including gay jokes, innuendos, disparaging remarks. As the church, Christ calls us to make disciples of everyone, not just straight people (Mat 28:19). May God forgive us where we’ve fallen short in this area and open our hearts to those hungering and thirsting for the living waters that only he can provide.

⁴⁹ Allberry, p. 67.

⁵⁰ Wesley Hill speaks about the importance of deep friendships and how he as a celibate gay Christian finds satisfying connections within the church. See his talk “Spiritual Friendship: Celibacy as a Call to Love” delivered at the Trinity School for Ministry (Whitchurch Publishing, February 15, 2015) on YouTube: [youtube.com/watch?v=KybVfV7e-ss](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KybVfV7e-ss)