

Transcript: The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality

Alright, I'd just like to start by saying thank you to everybody for coming tonight – I really appreciate it – and for being interested in learning more about this subject. I also want to thank College Hill United Methodist for graciously agreeing to host the event. My name is Matthew Vines, I'm 21 years old, and I'm currently a student in college, although I've been on leave for most of the last two years in order to study the material that I'll be presenting tonight. I was born and raised here in Wichita, in a loving Christian home and in a church community that holds to the traditional interpretation of Scripture on this subject.



Just to offer a brief outline for this presentation: I'll start by considering some of the broader issues and divisions that are behind this debate; and then I'll move to a closer examination of the main biblical texts that are involved in it; and then I'll offer some concluding remarks. The issue of homosexuality, of the ordination of gay clergy and of the blessing of same-sex unions, has caused tremendous divisions in the church in recent decades, and the church remains substantially divided over the issue today. On the one hand, the most common themes voiced by those who support changing traditional church teaching on homosexuality are those of acceptance, inclusion, and love, while on the other hand, those who oppose these changes express concerns about sexual purity, holiness, and most fundamentally, the place of Scripture in our communities. Are we continuing to uphold the Bible as authoritative, and are we taking biblical teachings seriously, even if they make us uncomfortable?

I want to begin tonight by considering the traditional interpretation of Scripture on this subject, in part because its conclusions have a much longer history within the church, and also because I think that many who adhere to that position feel that those who are arguing for a new position haven't yet put forth theological arguments that are as well-grounded in Scripture as their own, in which case the most biblically sound position should prevail.

The traditional interpretation, in summary form, is this: There are six passages in the Bible that refer in some way to same-sex behavior, and they are all negative. Three of them are direct and clear. In the Old Testament, in Leviticus, male same-sex relations are prohibited, and labeled an "abomination." And in the New Testament, in Romans, Paul speaks of women "exchanging natural relations for unnatural ones," and of men abandoning "natural relations with women and committing shameful acts with other men." And so according to the traditional interpretation, both the Old and the New Testament are consistent in their rejection of same-sex relationships. But it's not just those three verses, as well as three others that I'll come to later. It's true that 6 verses isn't all that many out of Scripture's 31,000. But not only are they all negative, from the traditional viewpoint, they gain broader meaning and coherence from the opening chapters of Genesis, in which God creates Adam and Eve, male and female. That was the original creation

– before the fall, before sin entered the world. That was the way that things were supposed to be. And so according to this view, if someone is gay, then their sexual orientation is a sign of the fall, a sign of human fallenness and brokenness. That was not the way that things were supposed to be. And while having a same-sex orientation is not in and of itself a sin, according to the traditional interpretation, acting upon it is, because the Bible is clear, both in what it negatively prohibits and in what it positively approves. Christians who are gay – those who are only attracted to members of the same sex – are thus called to refrain from acting on those attractions, to deny themselves, to take up their crosses and to follow Christ. And though it may not seem fair to us, God's ways are higher than our own, and it's not our role to question, but to obey.

Within this framework, gay people have a problem, and that is that they want to have sex with the wrong people. They tend to be viewed as essentially lustful, sexual beings. So while straight people fall in love, get married, and start families, gay people just have sex. But everyone has a sexual orientation – and it isn't just about sex. Straight people are never really forced to think about their sexual orientation as a distinctive characteristic, but it's still a part of them, and it affects an enormous amount of their lives. What sexual orientation is for straight people is their capacity for romantic love and self-giving. It's not just about sexual attraction and behavior. It's because we have a sexual orientation that we're able to fall in love with someone, to build a long-term, committed relationship with them, and to form a family. Family is not about sex, but for so many of us, it still depends upon having a companion, a spouse. And that's true for gay people as well as for straight people. That is what sexual orientation means for them, too.

Gay people have the very same capacity for romantic love and self-giving that straight people do. The emotional bond that gay couples share, the quality of love, is identical to that of straight couples. Gay people, like almost all of us, come from families, and they, too, long to build one of their own.

But the consequence of the traditional interpretation of the Bible is that, while straight people are told to avoid lust, casual relationships, and promiscuity, gay people are told to avoid romantic relationships entirely. Straight people's sexuality is seen as a fundamentally good thing, as a gift. It can be used in sinful or irresponsible ways, but it can also be harnessed and oriented toward a loving marriage relationship that will be blessed and celebrated by their community. But gay people, though they are capable of and desire loving relationships that are just as important to them, are told that, for them, even lifelong, committed relationships would be sinful, because their sexual orientation is completely broken. It's not an issue of lust versus love, or of casual versus committed relationships, because same-sex relationships are intrinsically sinful, no matter the quality and no matter the context. Gay people's sexual orientation is so broken, so messed up that nothing good can come from it – no morally good, godly relationship could ever come from it. And so they are told that they will never have a romantic bond that will be celebrated by their community; they are told that they will never have a family.

Philippians 2:4 tells us to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. And in Matthew 5, Jesus instructs that if someone makes you go one mile, go with them two miles. And so I'm going to ask you: Would you step into my shoes for a moment, and walk with me just one mile, even if it makes you a bit uncomfortable? I am gay. I didn't choose to be gay. It's not something that I would have chosen, not because it's necessarily a bad thing to be, but because it's extremely inconvenient, it's stressful, it's difficult, and it can often be isolating and lonely – to be different, to feel not understood, to feel not accepted. I grew up in as loving and stable of a family and home as I can imagine. I love my parents, and I have strong relationships with them both. No one ever molested or abused me growing up, and I couldn't have asked for

a more supportive and nurturing childhood than the one that I had. I've never been in a relationship, and I've always believed in abstinence until marriage. But I also have a deeply-rooted desire to one day be married, to share my life with someone, and to build a family of my own.

But according to the traditional interpretation of Scripture, as a Christian, I am uniquely excluded from that possibility for love, for companionship, and for family. But unlike someone who senses a calling from God to celibacy, or unlike a straight person who just can't find the right partner, I don't sense a special calling to celibacy, and I may well find someone I grow to love and would like to spend the rest of my life with. But if that were to happen, following the traditional interpretation, if I were to fall in love with someone, and if those feelings were reciprocated, my only choice would be to walk away, to break my heart, and retreat into isolation, alone. And this wouldn't be just a one-time heartbreak. It would continue throughout my entire life. Whenever I came to know someone whose company I really enjoyed, I would always fear that I might come to like them too much, that I might come to love them. And within the traditional interpretation of Scripture, falling in love is one of the worst things that could happen to a gay person. Because you will necessarily be heartbroken, you will have to run away, and that will happen every single time that you come to care about someone else too much. So while you watch your friends fall in love, get married, and start families, you will always be left out. You will never share in those joys yourself – of a spouse and of children of your own. You will always be alone.

Well, that's certainly sad, some might say, and I'm sorry for that. But you cannot elevate your experience over the authority of Scripture in order to be happy. Christianity isn't about you being happy. It's not about your personal fulfillment. Sacrifice and suffering were integral to the life of Christ, and as Christians, we're called to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow Him. This is true. But it assumes that there's no doubt about the correctness of the traditional interpretation of Scripture on this subject, which I'm about to explore. And already, two major problems have presented themselves with that interpretation. The first problem is this: In Matthew 7, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns against false teachers, and he offers a principle that can be used to test good teaching from bad teaching. By their fruit, you will recognize them, he says. Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Good teachings, according to Jesus, have good consequences. That doesn't mean that following Christian teaching will or should be easy, and in fact, many of Jesus's commands are not easy at all – turning the other cheek, loving your enemies, laying down your life for your friends. But those are all profound acts of love that both reflect God's love for us and that powerfully affirm the dignity and worth of human life and of human beings. Good teachings, even when they are very difficult, are not destructive to human dignity. They don't lead to emotional and spiritual devastation, and to the loss of self-esteem and self-worth. But those have been the consequences for gay people of the traditional teaching on homosexuality. It has not borne good fruit in their lives, and it's caused them incalculable pain and suffering. If we're taking Jesus seriously that bad fruit cannot come from a good tree, then that should cause us to question whether the traditional teaching is correct.

The second problem that has already presented itself with the traditional interpretation comes from the opening chapters of Genesis, from the account of the creation of Adam and Eve. This story is often cited to argue against the blessing of same-sex unions: in the beginning, God created a man and a woman, and two men or two women would be a deviation from that design. But this biblical story deserves closer attention. In the first two chapters of Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth, plants, animals, man, and everything in the earth. And He declares everything in creation to be either good or very good – except for one thing. In Genesis

2:18, God says, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” And yes, the suitable helper or partner that God makes for Adam is Eve, a woman. And a woman is a suitable partner for the vast majority of men – for straight men. But for gay men, that isn’t the case. For them, a woman is not a suitable partner. And in all of the ways that a woman is a suitable partner for straight men—for gay men, it’s another gay man who is a suitable partner. And the same is true for lesbian women. For them, it is another lesbian woman who is a suitable partner. But the necessary consequence of the traditional teaching on homosexuality is that, even though gay people have suitable partners, they must reject them, and they must live alone for their whole lives, without a spouse or a family of their own. We are now declaring good the very first thing in Scripture that God declared not good: for the man to be forced to be alone. And the fruit that this teaching has borne has been deeply wounding and destructive.

This is a major problem. By holding to the traditional interpretation, we are now contradicting the Bible’s own teachings: the Bible teaches that it is not good for the man to be forced to be alone, and yet now, we are teaching that it is. Scripture says that good teachings will bear good fruit, but now, the reverse is occurring, and we say it’s not a problem. Something here is off; something is out of place. And it’s because of these problems and these contradictions that more and more Christians have been going back to Scripture and re-examining the 6 verses that have formed the basis for an absolute condemnation of same-sex relationships. Can we go back, can we take a closer look at these verses, and see what we can learn from further study of them?

What are these 6 verses? There are three in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament, so I’ll go in order of their appearance in Scripture. In the Old Testament, we have the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 as well as two prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20. And in the New Testament, we have a passage by Paul in Romans 1, as well as two Greek terms in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1.

To begin, let’s look at Genesis 19, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 18, God and two angels come in the form of men to visit Abraham and Sarah at their tent alongside the Dead Sea. Abraham and Sarah do not yet realize who they are, but they show them lavish hospitality nonetheless. Halfway through the chapter, God – now beginning to be recognized by Abraham – tells him “[t]he outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.” Abraham’s nephew, Lot, and Lot’s family, live in Sodom, and so Abraham bargains with God, and gets Him to agree not to destroy the city if He finds even 10 righteous people there.

At the start of the next chapter, in Genesis 19, the two angels arrive in Sodom, still in the form of men. Lot invites them to spend the night in his home, and he prepares a meal for them. But beginning in verse 4, we read the following: “Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.” Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.”

But the men keep threatening, so the angels strike them with blindness. Lot and his family then flee from the city, and God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was not originally thought to have anything to do with sexuality at all, even if there is a sexual component to the passage we just read. But starting in

the Middle Ages, it began to be widely believed that the sin of Sodom, the reason that Sodom was destroyed, was homosexuality in particular. This later interpretation held sway for centuries, giving rise to the English term “sodomy,” which technically refers to any form of non-procreative sexual behavior, but at various points in history, has referred primarily to male same-sex relations. But this is no longer the prevailing interpretation of this passage, and simply because later societies associated it with homosexuality doesn’t mean that’s that what the Bible itself teaches. In the passage, the men of Sodom threaten to gang rape Lot’s angel visitors, who have come in the form of men, and so this behavior would at least ostensibly be same-sex. But that is the only connection that can be drawn between this passage and homosexuality in general, and there is a world of difference between violent and coercive practices like gang rape and consensual, monogamous, and loving relationships. No one in the church or anywhere else is arguing for the acceptance of gang rape; that is vastly different from what we’re talking about.

But the men of Sodom wanted to rape other men, so that must mean that they were gay, some will argue. And it was their same-sex desires, and not just their threatened rape, that God was punishing. But gang rape of men by men was used as a common tactic of humiliation and aggression in warfare and other hostile contexts in ancient times. It had nothing to do with sexual orientation or attraction; the point was to shame and to conquer. That is the appropriate background for reading this passage in Genesis 19, which, notably, is contrasted with two accounts of generous welcome and hospitality – that of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18 and Lot’s own display of hospitality in Genesis 19. The actions of the men of Sodom are intended to underscore their cruel treatment of outsiders, not to somehow tell us that they were gay.

And indeed, Sodom and Gomorrah are referred to 20 times throughout the subsequent books of the Bible, sometimes with detailed commentary on what their sins were, but homosexuality is never mentioned or connected to them. In Ezekiel 16:49, the prophet quotes God as saying, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.” So God Himself in Ezekiel declares the sin of Sodom to be arrogance and apathy toward the poor. In Matthew 10 and Luke 10, Jesus associates the sin of Sodom with inhospitable treatment of his disciples. Of all the 20 references to Sodom and Gomorrah throughout the rest of Scripture, only one connects their sins to sexual transgressions in general. The New Testament book of Jude, verse 7, states that Sodom and Gomorrah “gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.” But there are many forms of sexual immorality and perversion, and even if Jude 7 is taken as specifically referring to the threatened gang rape from Genesis 19:5, that still has nothing to do with the kinds of relationships that we’re talking about.

It’s now widely conceded by scholars on both sides of this debate that Sodom and Gomorrah do not offer biblical evidence to support the belief that homosexuality is a sin. But our next two verses, from Leviticus – “Do not lie with a man as one does with a woman; it is an abomination” – continue to be commonly cited to uphold that belief. And they certainly can be claimed to be of greater relevance to this issue than the matter of gang rape, so they deserve our careful study and attention. To back out for a moment and provide some context: Leviticus is the third book of the Bible. We have Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Beginning in Exodus and continuing through Deuteronomy, God delivers the Law to the Israelites, which contains 613 rules in total.

The Book of Leviticus deals primarily with ceremonial issues related to appropriate worship practices at the tabernacle: the various offerings and how to make them, clean versus unclean foods, diseases and bodily discharges, sexual taboos, and rules for the priests. Chapter 18 of Leviticus contains a list of sexual prohibitions, and chapter 20 follows this up with a list of

punishments. In these chapters, male same-sex intercourse is prohibited, and the punishment for violators is death. The specific verses are Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. They read: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” And 20:13 goes on to say: “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.”

Well, there we have it—for many, the biblical debate is now over. It’s surprising that so many people continue to believe that these verses in Leviticus somehow form the heart of the theological debate about homosexuality. They are, in fact, of secondary significance to the later passage by Paul in Romans 1. And the reason for that isn’t that their meaning is unclear, but that their context within the Old Testament Law makes them inapplicable to Christians. Much of the New Testament deals with the issue of the place of the Old Law in the emerging Christian church. As Gentiles were being included for the very first time into what was formerly an exclusively Jewish faith, there arose ferocious debates and divisions among the early Jewish Christians about whether Gentile converts should have to follow the Law, with its more than 600 rules. And in Acts 15, we read how this debate was resolved. In the year 49 AD, early church leaders gathered at what came to be called the Council of Jerusalem, and they decided that the Old Law would not be binding on Gentile believers. The most culturally distinctive aspects of the Old Law were the Israelites’ complex dietary code for keeping kosher and the practice of male circumcision. But after the Council of Jerusalem’s ruling, even those central parts of Israelite identity and culture no longer applied to Christians. Although it’s a common argument today, there is no reason to think that these two verses from the Old Law in Leviticus would somehow have remained applicable to Christians even when other, much more central parts of the Law did not.

In Galatians 6, Paul goes so far as to say that, in Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything. He speaks of the Old Law as a “yoke of slavery” that he warns Christians not to be burdened by. In Colossians 2, Paul writes that, through Christ, God “forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” In the Gospels, Jesus describes himself as the fulfillment of the Law, and in Romans 10:4, Paul writes “Christ is the end of the law.” Hebrews 8:13 states that the old covenant is now “obsolete,” because Christ is the basis of the new covenant, freeing Christians from the system of the Old Law, most of which was specific to the ancient Israelites, to their community and their unique worship practices. Christians have always regarded the Book of Leviticus, in particular, as being inapplicable to them in light of Christ’s fulfillment of the law. So while it is true that Leviticus prohibits male same-sex relations, it also prohibits a vast array of other behaviors, activities, and foods that Christians have never regarded as being prohibited for them. For example, chapter 11 of Leviticus forbids the eating of pork, shrimp, and lobster, which the church does not consider to be a sin. Chapter 19 forbids planting two kinds of seed in the same field; wearing clothing woven of two types of material; and cutting the hair at the sides of one’s head. Christians have never regarded any of these things to be sinful behaviors, because Christ’s death on the cross liberated Christians from what Paul called the “yoke of slavery.” We are not subject to the Old Law.

But the Old Law does contain some rules that Christians have continued to observe – the Ten Commandments, for example. And so some argue that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 – the prohibitions of male same-sex relations – should be an exception to the rule, and that they should continue to have force for Christians today. There are three main arguments that are made for this position. The first is the verses’ immediate context: Leviticus 18 and 20 also prohibit adultery, incest, and bestiality, all of which continue to be regarded as sinful, and so homosexuality should be as well. But just 3 verses away from the prohibition of male same-sex

relations, in 18:19, sexual relations during a woman's menstrual period are also prohibited, and this, too, is called an "abomination" at the chapter's close. But this is not regarded as sinful behavior by Christians; rather, it's seen as a limited matter of ceremonial cleanliness for the ancient Israelites. And all of the other categories of prohibitions in these chapters – on adultery, incest, and bestiality – are repeated multiple times throughout the rest of the Old Testament, both within the Law and outside of it: in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Ezekiel. But the prohibitions on male same-sex relations only appear in Leviticus, among many dozens of other prohibitions that Christians have never viewed as being applicable to them.

Well, Leviticus calls it an abomination, and if it was an abomination then, then it certainly can't be a good thing now. The term "abomination" is applied to a very broad range of things in the Old Law – eating shellfish in Leviticus 11, eating rabbit or pork in Deuteronomy 14; these are all called abominations. As I just said, sex during a woman's menstrual period is also called an abomination. The term "abomination" is primarily used in the Old Testament to distinguish practices that are common to foreign nations from those that are distinctly Israelite. This is why Genesis 43:32 says that for the Egyptians to eat with the Hebrews would be an abomination to the Egyptians, and why Exodus 8:26 says that for the Israelites to make sacrifices near the Pharaoh's palace would be an abomination to the Egyptians. There is nothing wrong with the Israelites' sacrifices, of course. The problem with both of these things is that they would blur the lines between practices that are specifically Israelite and those that are foreign. The nature of the term "abomination" in the Old Testament is intentionally culturally specific; it defines religious and cultural boundaries between Israel and other nations. But it's not a statement about what is intrinsically good or bad, right or wrong, and that's why numerous things that it's applied to in the Old Testament have long been accepted parts of Christian life and practice.

Okay, but the penalty is death – certainly, that indicates that the behavior in question is particularly bad, and that we should still regard it as sinful. But this overlooks the severity of all of the other punishments in the Old Law. Given the threats posed to the Israelites by starvation, disease, internal discord, and attacks from other tribes, maintaining order and cohesiveness was of paramount importance for them, and so almost all of the punishments in the Old Testament will strike us as being quite harsh. A couple that has sex during the woman's menstrual period is to be permanently exiled from the community. If a priest's daughter falls into prostitution, she is to be burned at the stake. Anyone who uses the Lord's name in vain is not only to be reprimanded, but to be stoned. And anyone who disobeys their parents is to be stoned as well. Even some things that we don't see as moral issues at all received the death penalty in the Old Testament – according to Exodus 35:2, working on the Sabbath was a capital offense. And in Ezekiel 18, the death penalty is applied to anyone who charges interest on a loan, and this, too, is called an "abomination" at the chapter's close. Simply because something received the death penalty in the Old Testament doesn't mean that Christians should view it as sinful; there's too much variance for that to be a consistent and effective approach. The default Christian approach for nearly two millennia now has been to view the particular hundreds of rules and prohibitions in the Old Law as having been fulfilled by Christ's death, and there is no good reason why Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 should be exceptions to that rule.

So if our three Old Testament passages do not, upon closer examination, furnish persuasive arguments against loving relationships for gay Christians, then what about our three New Testament passages? And indeed, for those who've spent some time studying this theological debate, they will know that the most significant of the six passages is not in the Old Testament; instead, it appears in the opening chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Rome: specifically, Romans 1:26-27. This passage is the most significant for three reasons: First, it's in the New Testament, and so it doesn't encounter the same problems of context and applicability that

Leviticus does. Secondly, unlike Leviticus, it speaks of both men and women. And thirdly, even though it's not very long, at two consecutive verses, it's still the longest discussion of any form of same-sex behavior anywhere in Scripture. And because these two verses are embedded within a broader theological argument about idolatry that's somewhat complex, I want to spend more time on this passage than any other.

Paul begins his letter in Romans 1-3 by describing the unrighteousness of all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, and the universal need for a savior. Romans 3 nears its close with the famous verse, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In Romans 3:10, Paul says, "There is no one righteous, not even one." To build his case to that effect, Paul argues in chapter 2 that, even though the Jews have the Law, they still don't follow it well enough to earn their salvation on their own. But he starts in chapter 1 by describing the unrighteousness of humanity more broadly. And in Romans 1:18-32, Paul writes of the descent of Gentiles into idolatry and the consequences for them of their rejection of God. He says that they knew the truth of God, but they rejected it; they exchanged the truth for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – birds, animals, reptiles. And so because they had given up God, God, in turn, let them go – He let them live without Him, and He gave them over, it says, to a wide array of vices and passions. Included among these passions were some forms of lustful same-sex behavior. In verses 26 and 27, we read the following:

"Because of this [referring to their idol worship], God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error."

Well, now, it seems, the case is finally closed. Even though the verses in Leviticus don't apply to Christians, here we have Paul in the New Testament explicitly teaching the unacceptability, the sinfulness of same-sex relationships. And even though he only speaks of lustful behavior, and not of loving relationships, he labels same-sex unions unnatural. They are outside of God's natural design, which was set forth in Genesis 1 and 2 and is exclusively heterosexual. So even if a same-sex relationship is loving and committed, it is still sinful. That is the traditional interpretation of Romans 1:26-27.

How solid of an interpretation is that? Does this passage require us to reject the possibility of loving relationships for gay people, and if so, how does that make sense, given the problems that I outlined earlier with that position? Was that Paul's intent here, to teach that God desires gay people to be alone for their entire lives, because their sexual orientation is broken, and is outside of His created, natural design?

How we understand this passage hinges in large part on how we understand the meaning of the terms "natural" and "unnatural." It's commonly assumed by those who hold to the traditional interpretation that these terms refer back to Genesis 1 and 2, and are intended to define heterosexuality as God's natural design and homosexuality as an unnatural distortion of that design. But once again, closer examination does not support that interpretation. In order to understand what Paul meant by the use of these terms, we have to consider two things. First, we have to look at the broader context of the passage in order to see how the concept of nature functions within it. And secondly, we need to see how Paul himself uses these terms in his other letters and how they were commonly and widely applied to sexual behavior in particular in the ancient world.

First, the passage's context. In 1:18-32, Paul is making a larger argument about idolatry, and that argument has a very precise logic to it. The reason, he says in verses 18-20, that the idolaters' actions are blameworthy is because they knew God. They started with the knowledge of God, but they chose to reject Him. Paul writes, "What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." The idolaters are without excuse because they knew the truth, they started with the truth, but they rejected it. Paul's subsequent statements about sexual behavior follow this same pattern. The women, he says, "exchanged" natural relations for unnatural ones. And the men "abandoned" relations with women and committed shameful acts with other men. Both the men and the women started with heterosexuality—they were naturally disposed to it just as they were naturally disposed to the knowledge of God—but they rejected their original, natural inclinations for those that were unnatural: for them, same-sex behavior. Paul's argument about idolatry requires that there be an exchange; the reason, he says, that the idolaters are at fault is because they first knew God but then turned away from him, exchanged Him for idols. Paul's reference to same-sex behavior is intended to illustrate this larger sin of idolatry. But in order for this analogy to have any force, in order for it to make sense within this argument, the people he is describing must naturally begin with heterosexual relations and then abandon them. And that is exactly how he describes it.

But that is not what we are talking about. Gay people have a natural, permanent orientation toward those of the same sex; it's not something that they choose, and it's not something that they can change. They aren't abandoning or rejecting heterosexuality—that's never an option for them to begin with. And if applied to gay people, Paul's argument here should actually work in the other direction: If the point of this passage is to rebuke those who have spurned their true nature, be it religious when it comes to idolatry or sexual, then just as those who are naturally heterosexual should not be with those of the same sex, so, too, those who have a natural orientation toward the same sex should not be with those of the opposite sex. For them, that would be exchanging "the natural for the unnatural" in just the same way. We have different natures when it comes to sexual orientation.

But is this just a clever argument that has no grounding in the historical context of Paul's world and therefore yields an interpretation that could not be what he originally intended? After all, the concept of sexual orientation is very recent; it was only developed within the past century, and has only come to be widely understood within the past few decades. So how can we take our modern categories and understandings and use them to interpret a text that is so far removed from them? But that level of removal is precisely the point. In the ancient world, homosexuality was widely considered, not to be a different sexual orientation or something inherent in a small minority of people, but to be an excess of lust or passion that anyone could be prone to if they let themselves go too much. Just a couple of quotes to illustrate this. A well-known first-century Greek philosopher named Dio Chrysostom wrote the following:

"The man whose appetite is insatiate in such things [referring to heterosexual relations] ...will have contempt for the easy conquest and scorn for a woman's love, as a thing too readily given...and will turn his assault against the male quarters...believing that in them he will find a kind of pleasure difficult and hard to procure."

A fourth-century Christian writer said of same-sex behavior: "You will see that all such desire stems from a greed which will not remain within its usual bounds." The abandonment of heterosexual relations for same-sex lust was frequently compared to gluttony in eating or

drinking. Sexuality was seen as a spectrum, with opposite-sex relations being the product of a “moderate” level of desire and same-sex relations the product of an excessive amount of desire. Personal orientation had nothing to do with it. But within this framework, as I said, same-sex relations were associated with the height of excess and lust, and that is why Paul invokes them in Romans 1. His purpose is to show that the idolaters were given over to unbridled passion, and to depict a scene of sexual chaos and excess that illustrates that. And that is completely consistent with how same-sex relations were most commonly described at the time. But the only reason that a reference to same-sex behavior helps Paul illustrate general sexual chaos is because the people he is describing first began with opposite-sex relations and then, in a burst of lust, abandoned them, exchanged them for something else.

And surely it is significant that Paul here speaks only of lustful, casual behavior. He says nothing about the people in question falling in love, making a lifelong commitment to one another, starting a family together. We would never dream of reading a passage in Scripture about heterosexual lust and promiscuity and then, from that, condemning all of the marriage relationships of straight Christians. There is an enormous difference between lust and love when it comes to our sexuality, between casual and committed relationships, between promiscuity and monogamy. That difference has always been held to be central to Christian teaching on sexual ethics for straight Christians. Why should that difference not be held to be as central for gay Christians? How can we take a passage about same-sex lust and promiscuity and then condemn any loving relationships that gay people might come to form? That is a very different standard than the one that we apply to straight people.

And again, the primary argument that is advanced in support of this kind of a different standard is that Paul doesn't merely condemn same-sex lust, he also calls same-sex desires “shameful” and labels same-sex unions “unnatural.” I've already explained why Paul's use of the term “unnatural” requires the idolaters' willful spurning of their natural heterosexual desires. And that's how this term functions within the passage as a whole, mirroring the idolaters' exchange of God for idols. But before we leave this passage, we also need to consider how Paul himself uses these terms in his other letters and how the terms “natural” and “unnatural” were commonly applied to sexual behavior in his day.

One of Paul's most significant references to “nature” outside of Romans 1 comes in 1 Corinthians 11. There, in verses 13-15, he writes:

“Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?”

This is actually the most similar passage in the New Testament to Romans 1:26-27, because not only does Paul refer to “nature” here, he also speaks of the concept of “disgrace,” which is the same term that is translated as “shameful” in Romans 1. But the way that we interpret these terms in 1 Corinthians 11 is very different than how the traditional interpretation wants to read them in Romans 1. One of the most common meanings of the Greek word for “nature” is custom, and that is how Christians widely interpret this passage in 1 Corinthians today. And the reference to what is a “disgrace” or “shame” is taken as specifically being shameful given particular customs. So how we read Paul here in 1 Corinthians is basically this: “Do not the customs of our society dictate that it is considered shameful for a man to have long hair, but honorable for a woman?” This reading aligns with ancient Mediterranean attitudes about gender and hair length, and it makes much more sense than the idea that natural biological processes would lead men to have short hair. By “nature,” it would grow long.

But again, this passage about hair length in 1 Corinthians is the most similar one in Paul's writings to the passage about sexual behavior in Romans 1. So if we understand Paul's references to "nature" and "disgrace" in 1 Corinthians as being about custom, why do we not do the same in Romans 1? And in fact, unlike the traditional interpretation, that approach would be consistent with how the terms "natural" and "unnatural" were actually used in regard to sexual behavior by the ancient Greeks and Romans. In those patriarchal societies, in which women were viewed as inferior to men, the main distinction that they made when discussing sexual behavior was not orientation, but rather, active versus passive roles. The Greeks and Romans, along with other societies of biblical times, believed that a man's natural, customary role was to be active in sexual relations, whereas a woman's was to be passive. When either of those roles were inverted – when a man was passive or a woman was active – they labeled that behavior shameful and "unnatural" in the sense of violating customary gender roles. That is why they commonly called same-sex unions "unnatural." But just like Greek and Roman attitudes about appropriate hair length, their views about gender roles are specific to those patriarchal cultures. In both of these cases, Paul is merely using terms that have already gained a wide currency to describe things in the societies that he is addressing. And he uses the term "nature" in Romans 1 just as he does in 1 Corinthians 11. So if we're going to be consistent as well as historically accurate in our biblical interpretation, then we need to acknowledge for Romans 1 what we already do for 1 Corinthians 11: the term "nature" here refers to social custom, not to the biological order, and it is a culturally specific term.

Our two remaining passages are less involved than the others, so I'll spend somewhat less time on them. They are 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, and the debate here centers around the translation of two Greek terms. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul warns against those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. And then he lists 10 different types of people who will not inherit the kingdom. Because the dispute here is about translation, I'll start with the King James Version of this passage, which was published more than 400 years ago and so predates this modern controversy. It reads:

"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Our key words for the discussion here are the words translated as "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind." These somewhat ambiguous translations in the King James are consistent with how these words were actually translated into English for hundreds of years: some kind of immorality or abuse, but specifically what kind was never stated. This changed halfway through the last century, when some Bible translators began connecting these terms directly to homosexuality. The first occurrence of this shift came in 1946, when a translation of the Bible was published that simply stated that "homosexuals" will not inherit the kingdom of God. Several decades later, after the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual behavior came to be more widely understood, this was changed to say that only "practicing homosexuals" will not inherit the kingdom. But these terms and concepts regarding sexual orientation are completely alien to the biblical world. Neither Greek, the language of the New Testament, nor Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, nor Latin, the language of early Christian translations of the Bible, had a word that means or corresponds to the English word for gay. The concept of sexual orientation, and of same-sex orientation in particular, didn't exist in the ancient world. The English term "homosexual" was not even coined until the end of the 19th century. And so translations of these words that suggest that Paul was using these distinctly modern concepts and categories are highly suspect. But today, there are many translations of the Bible

—though certainly not all of them—that link these terms in some way to homosexuality, rendering them variously as “males who practice homosexuality,” “men who have sex with men,” or “male prostitutes.” What is the basis for this shift in translation?

The word translated as “abusers of themselves with mankind” in the King James is a compound word. In the Greek, it is “arsenokoites,” “arsen” meaning “male,” and “koites” meaning “bed,” generally with a sexual connotation. And so the argument is that we can determine the meaning of this term from its etymology: male plus bed in the plural form must, then, refer to men who sleep with other men. But there are several problems with this approach. First, simply looking at a word’s component parts doesn’t necessarily tell us what it means. There are many English words where this approach would fail: for example, the words “understand,” “butterfly,” “honeymoon.” The component parts here – “honey” and “moon” – really don’t tell us anything about what that word actually means. In order to understand what a word means, you have to consider how it’s used in context. The problem with the word “abusers of themselves with mankind” – arsenokoites – is that it was used extremely rarely in ancient Greek. In fact, Paul’s use of it in 1 Corinthians is considered to be its first recorded use anywhere. And after Paul, the few places that it appears tend to be in lists of general vices, which are not the most helpful of contexts. Fortunately, however, many of these lists are grouped by category, and this Greek word consistently appears among sins that are of a primarily economic nature rather than those that are primarily sexual. This and some other contextual data indicate that this term referred to some kind of economic exploitation, likely through sexual means. This may have involved forms of same-sex behavior, but coercive and exploitative forms. There is no contextual support for linking this term to loving, faithful relationships.

The other debated word in this passage, translated as “effeminate” in the King James, is “malakos” in the Greek. This was a very common word in ancient Greek, and it literally means “soft.” It was used as an insult in a wide array of contexts – to refer to those who were considered weak-willed, cowardly, or lazy. And all of those failings were particularly associated with women in ancient times; hence, the rendering “effeminate.” In a specifically sexual context, the word was used to describe general licentiousness and debauchery, but this wasn’t limited to any particular kind of relationship. Men who took the passive role in sexual relations were sometimes labeled this term, which is the basis on which some modern translators connect it to homosexuality. But so many people were labeled this term for so many different things – most of them not even sexual in nature, and most of the sexual ones about men in relationships with women – that there’s no valid basis for picking out one possible reason out of dozens and saying that that must have been what Paul had in mind. It would be more faithful to the text to return to the ambiguity that prevailed for more than 1,900 years of translation. The notion that Paul is singling out gay people here and saying that they will not inherit the kingdom of God simply doesn’t hold up under scrutiny.

In the final passage, 1 Timothy 1:10, the first word – “abusers of themselves with mankind” – reappears in a list of people Paul says the law was written against. Here, the translation is “them that defile themselves with mankind.” The translation issues and debates here are the same as those from 1 Corinthians. Again, the strongest inference that can be drawn from other uses of this term is that it referred to economic exploitation through sexual coercion—possibly involving same-sex activity, but a very different kind than what we are discussing.

So those are our six passages, the six verses in the Bible that refer in some way to same-sex behavior. And indeed, they’re all negative. But that isn’t a conclusive argument. The majority of references to sexual behavior in general, and to heterosexual behavior, in the Bible are negative. That’s not because sexuality is a bad thing, but because most of the references to it in

Scripture are to lust, to excess, to infidelity, promiscuity, rape, or violence. And yes, the Bible also contains positive affirmations of opposite-sex relationships in addition to hundreds of negative verses about forms of them. And it does not contain explicit positive statements about same-sex relationships. But it also hardly ever discusses same-sex behavior of any kind, and the very few references to it are in completely different contexts than loving relationships. In Genesis 19, there is a reference to threatened gang rape. In 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1, there is a reference to what appears to be sexual exploitation. In Romans 1, Paul refers to lustful same-sex behavior as part of an illustration of general sexual chaos and excess. And though he labels this behavior “unnatural,” he’s using this term in the sense of “uncustomary” gender roles, just as he’s referring to social custom when he labels long hair in men “unnatural.” The only place in Scripture where male same-sex relations are actually prohibited—in Leviticus—comes in the context of an Old Testament law code that has never applied to Christians.

The Bible never directly addresses, and it certainly does not condemn, loving, committed same-sex relationships. There is no biblical teaching about sexual orientation, nor is there any call to lifelong celibacy for gay people. But the Bible does explicitly reject forced loneliness as God’s will for human beings, not just in the Old Testament, when God says that “[i]t is not good for the man to be alone,” but in the New Testament as well. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul writes about marriage and celibacy. He was celibate himself, and he says that he wishes that everyone else could be celibate as well. But, he says, each person has their own gift. For Paul, celibacy is a spiritual gift, and one that he realizes that many Christians don’t have. However, because many of them lack the gift of celibacy, Paul observes that sexual immorality is rampant. And so he prescribes marriage as a kind of remedy or protection against sexual sin for Christians who lack the gift of celibacy. “It is better to marry than to burn with passion,” he says. And today, the vast majority of Christians do not sense either the gift of celibacy or the call to it. This is true for both straight and gay Christians. And so if the remedy against sexual sin for straight Christians is marriage, why should the remedy for gay Christians not be the same?

The arguments and debates that we have, both in the church and in civil society, about gay marriage tend to get lost in abstractions. Is it right for a man to marry another man? Or for a woman to marry another woman? Well, it doesn’t seem right. That isn’t how God designed us. He made men for women, and women for men. That is His design—His definition of marriage—and it’s not for us to tamper with or change. But these arguments are always made by people who are themselves heterosexual, who have always fit in, who haven’t endured years of internal torment and agony because they have a different sexual orientation than their friends, than their parents, than seemingly everyone else in the world. But those people, gay people, are just as much children of God and just as much a part of His creation as everyone else. And there’s something terribly unseemly about straight Christians insisting that gay Christians are somehow inferior to them, or broken, or that gay people only exist because of the fall, and that God really intended to make everyone straight like them. But you know, I am a part of creation, too, including my sexual orientation. I’m a part of God’s design. That’s the first thing that I learned growing up in Sunday school – that God created me, that God loves me, that I am a beloved child of God, no more and no less valuable than anyone else. I love God. And I love Jesus. I really do. But that doesn’t mean that I need to hate myself, or somehow wallow in self-pity, misery, and loathing for the rest of my life. That’s not what God created me to do.

Our discussion of this issue, of the “gay issue,” can’t take place in the realm of abstractions, of musings about ideal design and ideal gender roles, as though gay people don’t even exist. Jesus placed a particular focus on those others overlooked, on those who were outcast, on mistreated and marginalized minorities. And if we are working to emulate the life of Christ, then that’s where our focus needs to be, too. Romans 12 tells us to “honor one another above

yourselves...rejoice with those who rejoice,” and “mourn with those who mourn.” Hebrews 13:3 says, “Remember those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” How fully have you absorbed, not just the existence of gay and lesbian Christians, but the depth of the pain and the hurt that their own brothers and sisters have inflicted on them? Does that pain grieve you as though it were your own?

And how aware are you of the ways in which you may be contributing to suffering and hurt in gay people’s lives? It’s still commonplace for straight Christians to say, “Yes, I believe that homosexuality is a sin, but don’t blame me – I’m just reading the Bible. That’s just what it says.” Well, first of all, no, you are not just reading the Bible. You are taking a few verses out of context and extracting from them an absolute condemnation that was never intended. But you are also striking to the very core of another human being and gutting them of their sense of dignity and of self-worth. You are reinforcing the message that gay people have heard for centuries: You will always be alone. You come from a family, but you’ll never form one of your own. You are uniquely unworthy of loving and being loved by another person, and all because you’re different, because you’re gay.

Being different is no crime. Being gay is not a sin. And for a gay person to desire and pursue love and marriage and family is no more selfish or sinful than when a straight person desires and pursues the very same things. The Song of Songs tells us that King Solomon’s wedding day was “the day his heart rejoiced.” To deny to a small minority of people, not just a wedding day, but a lifetime of love and commitment and family is to inflict on them a devastating level of hurt and anguish. There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that Christians are called to perpetuate that kind of pain in other people’s lives rather than work to alleviate it, especially when the problem is so easy to fix. All it takes is acceptance. The Bible is not opposed to the acceptance of gay Christians, or to the possibility of loving relationships for them. And if you are uncomfortable with the idea of two men or two women in love,

if you are dead-set against that idea, then I am asking you to try to see things differently for my sake, even if it makes you uncomfortable. I’m asking you to ask yourself this: How deeply do you care about your family? How deeply do you love your spouse? And how tenaciously would you fight for them if they were ever in danger or in harm’s way? That is how deeply you should care, and that is how tenaciously you should fight, for the very same things for my life, because they matter just as much to me. Gay people should be a treasured part of our families and our communities, and the truly Christian response to them is acceptance, support, and love. Thank you, and thank you to everyone for coming tonight.