

But the Bible says...

Responding to people who cite Scripture in opposing rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people

For Christians who take the Bible seriously, but not literally, it can be challenging to respond to those who use Scripture to support their opposition to LGBT people and their rights. How do we counter such claims without seeming undedicated, unprepared, even un-Christian? This document is meant to address that challenge.

We have, essentially, two choices in responding to calls to Biblical literalism when it comes to LGBT issues. One option is to tackle the relevant passages one by one, calling into question how they have been translated and interpreted over time. The other option is to remind those who cite Scripture in opposing LGBT rights that we all pick and choose which parts of the Bible to follow and which to set aside.

Selectivity

Let's begin with the second option. **Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all pick and choose which parts of the Bible to adhere to and emphasize and which to play down or overlook.** We are as free to set aside the handful of passages that may be interpreted as opposing homosexuality as we are to set aside the verses that prohibit wearing blended fabrics and eating shellfish. Few, if any, Biblical literalists would be willing to become slave owners—much less slaves—to adhere to passages in the Bible offering advice on the proper treatment of slaves.

When it comes to verses governing personal relationships, few are in favor of punishing divorced and remarried Christians, and no one advocates stoning women who are not virgins when they marry, much less suggesting that our government enforce rules of this type. **It is only when Bible verses concern same-sex relationships that Biblical literalists hope to make their interpretation of the Bible into civil law.** In countering such arguments, we may wish to gently point out that few, if any, of us follows every verse of Biblical instruction. Furthermore, none of us expects the government to take on the role of enforcing such admonishments or restricting the rights of those who do not follow Biblical rules.

One more thing on this front: **Biblical literalists often claim that the Bible is inerrant. Regardless of how we view this claim, it is worth pointing out that we, as human interpreters, are not infallible.** There are many documents written in our own time, in our own language, that we find difficult to understand and act upon. Consider, for example, a parent attempting to assemble a bicycle on Christmas Eve, trying to follow instructions that are, ostensibly, in simple English. Or think of the lengthy legal statements that accompany our financial statements or even our computer software. Do we even try to read and comprehend them? Would we succeed, if we did? How much more difficult is it for us to understand texts written thousands of years ago in other languages for other eyes and ears? We should consider the weight of this challenge—and ask opponents to LGBT rights to consider it—when discussing how the Bible should be understood and applied to modern life.

Passage-by-passage responses

It is worth noting that very few passages in the Bible are at issue. Notably, there is no Gospel verse that addresses homosexuality. If Jesus had anything to say about the matter, it was not recorded.

Genesis 2:21-25

"So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.' Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed."

This is the introduction of Adam and Eve and the establishment of their procreative relationship as natural, which leads some to conclude that same-sex relationships are unnatural. However, the text says nothing of non-procreative relationships (such as those between opposite-sex couples who cannot or do not wish to have children) nor about singleness. Might these states also be considered unnatural, and, if so, should the people in these states be punished by the church or the state? If not, does it make sense to target same-sex couples and their relationships?

Genesis 19:1-14

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof. But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city - bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it." So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, "Up, get out of this place; for the Lord is about to destroy the city." But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

This is the infamous story of Sodom, which God destroys after townspeople try to force Lot to allow his visitors (sent by God) to be raped by a mob. It is often discussed as a serious violation of traditional Middle Eastern rules governing hospitality to strangers and about basic kindness. It certainly is not a story about same-sex relationships in any sense that we would recognize. Ezekiel (16:48-49) makes Sodom's lesson plain:

This is the sin of Sodom; she and her suburbs had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not help or encourage the poor and needy. They were arrogant and this was abominable in God's eyes.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

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

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.

These passages *appear* to be more on point. For those who support LGBT rights, these verses sound pretty damning. It is important to address them, as they have literally been employed to justify actual violence against gay people.

Context is crucial here. These passages are part of the holiness code, ways Jews were supposed to behave to set themselves apart and please God. It includes prohibitions on eating shellfish, having tattoos and touching the skin of a pig (sorry, football fans...), none of which anyone could consider moral issues on par with the prohibition on murder, for example.

If we are going to suggest Leviticus remains in force, we ought to be prepared to live by the whole thing, not just elevate a couple select verses to be used as weapons.

Romans 1:24-27

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 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.

In these verses, Paul criticizes “unnatural” same-sex encounters. Interpretations range from Paul’s primary concern being an inappropriate obsession with sex to the possibility that he is describing sexual practices by those worshipping Aphrodite, Diana and other gods and goddesses, including sex with temple prostitutes. What these passages do not seem to refer to, however, is a modern concept of a same-sex relationship.

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

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.

This means understanding that 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, which he entrusted to me.

These short passages condemn illicit sexual behavior. They have (sometimes) been translated from Greek to refer to homosexuality, but the words (*malokois* and *arsenokoitai*) are confusing for scholars. The first appears to refer to young male prostitutes, and the latter may refer to their clients. What is clear, again, however, is that these passages do not refer to today's same-sex relationships.

Key Points

There are three key points to keep in mind when responding to particular passages that opponents of LGBT rights routinely cite:

1. There just aren't that many of them, which suggests that homosexuality isn't much of an issue.
2. Jesus did not discuss homosexuality at all.
3. The passages in both the Old Testament and New Testament that appear to be about homosexuality were written centuries before any understanding of sexual orientation, much less any understanding of modern, consensual, non-commercial relationships of same-sex couples. The authors of these texts simply did not know or understand LGBT people as we do today, and they could not have been referring to them and their relationships as we understand them. We must keep this in mind when interpreting these verses.

Sources

This handout draws principally from two sources (other than the Bible). The first is Mel White's extraordinary piece, *What the Bible Says—and Doesn't Say—about Homosexuality*. This document is long, 24 pages, but well worth the read for its straight-forward analysis. It is available on the Soulforce website at <http://www.soulforce.org/pdf/whatthebiblesays.pdf>

The second source is Kristin Swenson's 2010 book *Bible Babel: Making Sense of the Most Talked About Book of All Time*, published by Harper, an imprint of Harper Collins.

Another helpful reference is this interview with Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson:

http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/12/lgbt_religious_texts.html

At the end of the interview are links to several articles Robinson wrote for *The Washington Post* addressing the passages discussed above.