

What the Bible Says (And Doesn't Say [About Homosexuality])

A Review
C. Gourgey, Ph.D.

What the Bible Says (and Doesn't Say)

Sister Carol Perry

(Marble Collegiate Church, undated)

Sister Carol Perry has been a respected Bible teacher at Marble Collegiate Church for many years. She gave this study on what the Bible does and does not say about homosexuality for the GIFTS Community (LGBTQ in Fellowship, Tradition, and Service) some years ago (the disk is not dated). Her goal was to dispel the notion, popular among conservative Evangelicals, that the Bible condemns homosexuality, and so discourage the use of the Bible to marginalize gay people. Her intention is clearly honorable. Nevertheless, her approach bears some examination, not only to determine its success but to make us think about what the proper way to approach the Bible on such controversial and possibly inflammatory subjects really should be.

So let us consider and evaluate each of her arguments in turn.

1. Genesis 19:4-5: Claim that the “sin of Sodom” was homosexuality

Lot shows hospitality to two angelic visitors. The townspeople surround his house and demand that Lot hand them over “so that we may know them.” Conservatives have taken this to mean that homosexuality was rampant in Sodom and for that reason the city was destroyed. Hence the term “sodomy.”

Sister Carol states that the phrase “so that we may know them” is uncertain and that no one can say what it means. This does not reflect the scholarly consensus. The word for “know” comes from the verb יָדַע, which in biblical Hebrew has a sexual connotation when its object is a person. To “know” a person in the usual sense we assume in English, one would use the Hebrew verb הִכִּיר. It seems quite clear what the townspeople’s intentions

were. Nevertheless, the sin here is not homosexuality but inhospitality leading to violence. So I would come to the same conclusion as Sister Carol, but not because the text lacks reference to homosexuality.

2. Leviticus 18:22: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”

Sister Carol dismisses this one on the grounds that there are many other prohibitions in Leviticus we do not observe, such as wearing a garment of mixed materials, trimming one’s beard, getting tattoos, and so on. I believe this argument is valid and more persuasive than the linguistic analyses she uses elsewhere. However, it runs the risk of relativizing the Bible: what may have made sense to people then no longer does to us now. This issue, which we will return to in the conclusion, leads many to prefer using word analysis to alter the Bible’s meaning, but as we will continue to see, that approach does not work and leads to even worse problems.

3. Romans 1:26-27: Condemnation of “unnatural intercourse”

Sister Carol claims we cannot really know what “unnatural intercourse” meant because Paul never defines it. But actually, he does: “men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another” (Romans 1:27). That is pretty explicit. Sister Carol suggests that Paul may be criticizing people’s “use and abuse of each other” or relationships of unequal power, but Paul does not draw such restrictions. Clearly Paul is specifically concerned about relationships in which intercourse with women is replaced by intercourse with men.

Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality here is total. He finds it a violation of the natural order God created. Commenting on this section in the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdman’s, 2016), after a careful analysis of the Greek text the scholar Richard N. Longenecker states:

Paul’s attitude toward homosexual behavior could hardly be more adversely expressed. For he condemns it totally — as did also all Jews and all Jewish Christians of his day.... For though it was often asserted by those who practiced it that homosexuality was “natural” — even, as argued both then and today, a legitimate feature of divine creation — Paul viewed such a claim as in direct opposition to the moral order established by God in creation, where only in

marriage do a man and a woman “become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). (NIGTC on Romans, 217, 218)

The claim that Paul is only talking about unequal or abusive relationships, such as pederasty or sexual slavery, does not stand up to a close examination of the text. It states: “the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another” (Romans 1:27). The phrase “for one another” (**εἰς ἀλλήλους**) implies desire on both sides, meaning a consensual act. And it is not only the act, but the passion itself that is sinful, an unnatural passion leading to an unnatural act. *Nowhere does Paul say anything about unequal power relationships.* That is a modern rationalization. What Paul does talk about is “natural” vs. “unnatural” (Greek: **παρὰ φύσιν**, “contrary to nature”) intercourse. It is impossible to draw the conclusion that Paul, were he living today, would not disapprove of same-sex relationships as we know them.

4. 1 Corinthians 6:9: Condemnation of sexual immorality

The two key words in this verse, translated by the NRSV as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites,” are **μαλακοί** and **ἀρσενικοῖται** respectively. Sister Carol asserts that these words are not translatable. Of the first, she says “no one is quite certain how it should be translated.” Of the second, she says “nobody but nobody offers a translation which makes any sense.” To back up her claim she refers to the Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, which says nothing about the first term and offers only this small snippet concerning the second: “the key Greek term involved (*arsenokoítēs*) is rare and of uncertain meaning.”

How reliable is this? Sister Carol states that Eerdmans is “probably the greatest dictionary of the Bible that has been put together.” This is misleading. Eerdmans is a fine biblical dictionary, but not the kind of tool to use for this type of study. The proper resource for this kind of word study is a New Testament Greek lexicon. Eerdmans is not a lexicon, but rather a very concise topical reference work. All Hebrew and Greek words are transliterated rather than presented in their original orthography, indicating that the work is not meant for scholars but for the general reader. A professional scholar would not consult a work like Eerdmans for linguistic analysis at a deep level; it just does not have the depth and authority that kind of scholarship requires.

The gold standard for biblical Greek lexicons is Frederick William Danker's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (commonly known as BDAG, for Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, the scholars on whose work this lexicon is based). It has much to say about both terms. As to **μαλακός**, it does sometimes have the meaning "soft," which Sister Carol mentions as a possibility, but especially in conjunction with **ἀρσενοκοίτης** it means the passive partner in a same-sex relationship, and this fits the present context perfectly. BDAG traces this use of the word in several ancient sources.

The second term, **ἀρσενοκοίτης**, which Sister Carol says no one can translate, is actually not a mystery. It is a compound of **ἄρσεν**, "male" (cf. Septuagint, Genesis 1:27) and **κοίτη**, "bed" (related to the word "coitus"), a metonym for sexual activity. It might thus be translated "male-bedder." It refers to a male participant in a same-sex relationship, often the dominant partner and so complements **μαλακός**. Other respected Greek lexicons, such as Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* and the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (NIDNTTE), concur. The common English term for **μαλακός** is "catamite"; that for **ἀρσενοκοίτης** is "pederast" but it was also used for male homosexual activity in general (e.g. Sibylline Oracles 2:73). Thus even though this word is not found before Paul and some scholars even think Paul coined it, we can still know how it was understood. And according to BDAG under the entry for this word, "Paul's strictures against same-sex activity cannot be explained on the basis of alleged Temple prostitution... or limited to contract with boys for homoerotic service." It is clear from the way these words appear in other sources, as well as how they are used together, that Paul is indeed condemning same-sex activity. The claim that we cannot know what these words meant founders on the evidence of scholarship.

And again, Paul cannot be referring only to unequal or abusive relationships since he also mentions "fornicators" (Greek: **πόρνοι**). BDAG defines **πόρνος** (from which we get "pornography") simply as "one who practices sexual immorality."

Since there has been much controversy concerning **ἀρσενοκοίτης**, it is also worth noting that the construction **ἄρσενος κοίτην**, from which this word derives and from where Paul may have gotten it, occurs in the Septuagint (Leviticus 20:13: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman").

There the context is clearly homosexual behavior. There is also a construction **μητροκοίτης**, from **μήτηρ** (mother) and **κοίτη** (bed, again a metonym for sexual activity) and meaning “one who has intercourse with his mother” in the work of Hipponax, an ancient Greek poet of the late 6th century BCE. It is a parallel construction to **άρσενοκοίτης** and clearly precedes Paul. And again, the juxtaposition of **μαλακός** and **άρσενοκοίτης** strongly suggests two complementary partners in a homosexual interaction; the two terms shed light on each other. Thus the contention made by some apologists for Paul, that we cannot know the meaning of **άρσενοκοίτης**, is simply not plausible.

So while it is true that the word is found very rarely in ancient literature, the evidence we do have leaves little doubt as to Paul’s intended meaning.

The word also occurs in 1 Timothy 1:10, but as Sister Carol points out, the letter is pseudo-Pauline and adds nothing new.

Conclusion

The nature of this discussion forces us to confront the question of how we evaluate the biblical text and our relationship to it. We are removed from the writing of the New Testament by two thousand years, and by much more from the Hebrew Bible. Unless we have ceased to think, we will experience cognitive dissonance on encountering the contrasts and conflicts between the values of the biblical era and of our own. We may feel forced to take sides, to choose between modern or Bible-era values. One way some try to escape this cognitive dissonance is to make the biblical text conform to our own opinion. We look for ways to make the Bible say what we want, or failing that, at least to make it seem like its apparent meaning can’t possibly be the real meaning.

This may make us feel better, but it is not true to the biblical text. Instead of true exegesis, it can become an attempt to try to make the Bible conform to a predetermined conclusion. We should feel no need for this. The Bible is a product of both divine inspiration and the culture of its times. Where one leaves off and the other begins is not obvious. The Bible originated in a patriarchal culture where sexual roles were more rigidly defined than they are today. We cannot expect the text not to reflect that. Paul did condemn homosexual behavior; that much is clear. It should be possible for us to recognize this without feeling it a threat to the Bible’s integrity. Still, it may

not be easy for some to subordinate the authority of any part of the Bible to any external standard.

Conservative Evangelicalism solves this problem with the doctrine of *biblical inerrancy*. The biblical text “as written” is the ultimate standard of truth (totally ignoring the ambiguities of the translation process, but that is another discussion). We pay a huge price for biblical inerrancy, and discrimination against LGBT people is no small part of that. But what is the alternative? Must we then discard the Bible’s authority altogether? Is the Bible then subject to whatever values happen to be fashionable?

Absolutely not. Discarding biblical inerrancy does not mean subordinating the Bible to any currently popular idea. Rather, the Bible can and should be its own judge. Its writings span centuries and reflect an evolution in the understanding of reality and of God. The height of that evolution comes to us through Jesus Christ. Numbers 15 tells us that God commands the stoning of sabbath breakers. But in John 8 Jesus stops the stoning of an adulterous woman. The Bible itself changes; it corrects itself, and that is the fatal flaw in the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

Everything, including the Bible itself, and including the words of Paul, is subject to the standard of Jesus Christ. As Sister Carol points out, Jesus himself had nothing to say about homosexuality. But he did reach out to people who were different, who were marginalized, whom society rejected. That he would have condemned people for not being heterosexual is unthinkable. Jesus provides the only standard we need.

And to be fair to Paul, he could not have had any notion of what today we understand as sexual orientation. If he had, he might have expressed himself differently – or maybe not. It is only recently (actually within my lifetime) that, in our society at least, the stigma on homosexuality is beginning to disappear. Since Paul calls such relations “unnatural,” it is not unlikely that were he alive today, his position on such matters would be conservative. In any case, Paul said what he said, in some of the clearest statements to be found in the Pauline letters. Trying to make him say what he did not, just because it makes us feel more comfortable, or even because we think it might serve a moral purpose, is not a fruitful exercise.

We understand much more now about human psychology and physiology than was known in the first century, but biblical inerrancy would freeze the

state of our knowledge to what it was two millennia ago. Understandably, people now armed with this new knowledge want a response to the evangelical assertion that the Bible condemns homosexuality. The proper response is not to insist that the Bible really says it our way. That still concedes the erroneous premise of biblical inerrancy; it just tries to turn it in another direction. A better response is to assert that Paul was not divine, he was human like the rest of us, and the word of Paul is not the word of God, even if someone some time in history included his letters within the scriptural canon.

The Bible does contain contradictions and errors, such as divinely prescribed capital punishment for sabbath breaking. That does not mean the Bible is not divinely inspired. Inspiration comes from God, but is filtered through broken human vessels. It is a matter of discernment, of wrestling with our scriptures, to appreciate the inspiration in as pure a form as possible, without being chained to outworn ideas that lead us away from compassion.

Therefore we should feel no need to twist Paul's words around to make them say what we want. Instead we can accept Paul as a man of his time, a flawed human being with limited understanding who, when he was composing his letters, had no idea he was writing the Bible. There are parts of Paul's letters that are clearly inspired, in which one can truly sense God's spirit shining through the words. Passages such as Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 13 immediately come to mind, and there are others. But there is no reason to insist that every word of Paul is necessarily the word of God, and Paul himself probably would not have said so. In everything, including reading the Bible, we should be guided by the values that Christ lived and taught.

We should therefore meet textual difficulties such as Paul's condemnation of homosexuality as a challenge leading to deeper ways of understanding and engaging with scripture. We need also to be mindful of the standard of truth that the Bible does provide. Jesus did rebuke and correct his disciples, as Peter and the others could well attest. Perhaps had he known Paul in the flesh, he would have corrected him too. The guidance is there, but we don't find it by clinging to the literal meanings of words. It is the spirit that gives life.

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