



## Why I Believe Homosexuality is NOT a Sin

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Let us consider the concept of sin.

Before we can think about whether homosexuality in and of itself is a sin, it is necessary to understand what sin is.<sup>1</sup> Sin has multiple aspects. It is ontological in that it is a constituent element of the very being of humanity. It is ethical regarding the trespass and transgression of moral boundaries developed by particular societies at a particular historical moment. And it is theological when it is understood as idolatry. I consider these facets of sin as I form my conclusion that homosexuality is not a sin. Objectification of the Other and the idolatry of desire is sin whether heterosexual or homosexual.

When we dig down to the root of the English word “sin”, we find the Latin *esse* which mean “to be.” It is the same root word from which grows the words “essence” and “essential.” The essence of a thing is the element of the thing without which the thing is not the thing. It is the inherent, unchanging portion of the entity. When we think of sin as being, we are saying that sin is a fundamental characteristic of humanity. The question becomes: is sin as being, as *esse*, the only fundamental characteristic of humanity? This cannot be true because if this were so, there would be no space for redemption.

The history of Christian theology regarding sin is the history of arguments about original sin as human depravity and the salvific work of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Human beings are thought to have been born morally culpable. I do not accept the notion of original sin as moral culpability and human depravity from the moment of birth. I say the essence of humanity is the capacity to choose. The being, the *esse*, the sin is singularity. It is estrangement from God, the human community, nature and creation. We spend our entire lives learning the moral balance between what is right for us as singular individuals in relationship to what is right for others. Human beings are born capable of making depraved choices, but we are also capable

of choosing that which is noble and holy. In Christianity, this means following Jesus and hearing the Holy Spirit.

When we think about the ethical aspect of sin, trespass and transgression, we think of the violation of moral or religious law. Both the concepts of trespass and transgression are rooted in the idea of stepping across boundaries. Thus, sin is a willful decision to invade the space of the Other. It is the failure to respect the inherent human dignity of the Other. It is the decision to treat another human being as an object for our pleasure. It is an I-it relationship rather than an I-Thou relationship. In Kantian terms, it is to use other individuals as a means to an end rather than as an end in themselves. Such a choice is sinful whether it is a heterosexual or a homosexual choice.

However, moral laws are at once a function of societal custom and of divine command as understood through scripture.<sup>ii</sup> Now the questions are: which of the scriptural prohibitions against homosexual sex are reflections of societal customs that are important for only a particular moment in time and space? Which are immutable divine commands?

Leviticus 18:22 says: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” This verse is a part of a longer passage dedicated to the boundaries of sexual relations. It is a command that the people of Israel live a moral life that is different from other peoples. God intends for God’s people to be morally distinctive. (Leviticus 18:1-5) The prohibitions are about keeping the family strong by establishing limits around relationships within families. In this epoch the patriarchal family was the basis of the social and economic structure of the society. The prohibition against a homosexual act read within this context can be seen as a law specific to this particular society in this particular epoch in history. It is important to remember that at this time women were considered property, slavery was acceptable, and God commanded genocidal war.

All of these realities notwithstanding, God is a God of new mercies. Morning by morning God’s liberating Spirit moves through human communities. God’s new mercies affirm the equal humanity of women, liberates slaves, and makes genocidal war unthinkable as anything that God either requires or sanctions. It also brings justice to those who live on the margins of society (Lamentations 3: 22-24; 31-36).

The scriptural passages in the New Testament that speak of homosexual acts are at once ethical and theological. In Romans 1:25-27 the problem is idolatry:

“because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped 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.”

Here Paul is writing about the Greek worship of gods that are represented in stone and worshipped with various sexual rituals. For example, history tells us of the worship of the goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Historian Will Durant writes:

“At Athens and Corinth the courtesans built temples to her as their patron saint. At the beginning of April various citizens in Greece celebrated her great festival, the Aphrodisia, and on that occasion, for those who cared to take part, sexual freedom was the order of the day” (185).

The worship of Dionysus, a Greek dying and resurrected god, also had a festival that included unrestrained drinking, dancing and frenzy “in which all bonds were loosed” (187) However, idolatrous ritual is only one portion of a longer list of transgressions—Romans 1: 29-32. Paul goes on to write in chapter 2 of Romans against those who judge while they do the same things.

In I Corinthian 6:9-10, sodomy is also one offense in a long list: fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers. A note in the Harper Collins Study Bible explains the term “sodomite” thusly. “Greek *arsenokoitai* lit ‘those who bed males’, may be Paul’s own coinage, for no earlier occurrence of the term is known. It seems to refer to the more active partner in a male homosexual act.”

Again, it is important to note the historical context. At this moment in Greek history there was no homosexual-heterosexual distinction. Many if not most men engaged in both same and opposite sex relationships. Some even considered homosexual sex the more noble kind of sex since sex inside marriage was primarily for the procreation of legitimate children. Men kept company with female courtesans for companionship, intellectual conversation and sex. Societal disapprobation of homosexual sex was reserved for the passive partner. In this passage of scripture, Paul wants to make clear that the wrong doing in male prostitution includes buyer and seller, both the active and passive participants.

In I Timothy 1:8-11, we see a similar list. This list includes murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers and others that are contrary to the teaching of the gospel. In this passage, “sodomite” is placed alongside of fornicators and slave traders. All of these activities are about the objectification of human beings, about the buying and selling of a person’s body.

When we look at the various lists, what they all have in common is the idolatry of desire. When our desires are paramount, when we are willing to use human beings, even to use God, as an instrument of fulfilling those desires then those desires become the object of our worship. We have made a depraved choice. We have made an unloving faithless choice. This is sin.

Radical love loves love and loves lovers. Jesus taught us to love with radical compassion, with an agape love that is the only aspect of human behavior that is not temporary

and transient. God also gives us the gift of erotic love—homosexual and heterosexual. It is a gift that is also one way God makes God’s presence known in our lives.

### Related Links

On Martin Buber and the I-Thou relationship see:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Buber.html> accessed 1 December 2010

On homosexuality see:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/homosexuality/> accessed 1 December 2010

### Works Cited

Durant, Will. The Life of Greece. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1966.

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<sup>i</sup> Whether or not homosexuality is an orientation or a preference is beyond the scope of this essay. I will not discuss the creation of humanity and whether or not homosexuality derives from an androgynous humanity. As a moral philosopher, I think about the choices that human beings make and whether or not those choices are ethical and whether they comport with what we can know of divine will.

<sup>ii</sup> I do not believe in natural law, so I find my understanding of God’s law from an interpretation of scripture that I hope and pray is informed by Holy Spirit.