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**Bible Study – November 11, 2015**  
**Practicing Safe Text: What’s It All About?**  
**Part 2 of 3**

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“As Christians who believe in the authority of Scripture, this Bible study series is designed to highlight the importance of critical biblical exegesis (i.e. “interpretation”) for providing clarity on matters of faith and practice. Historically, the Bible has been used by Christians to justify oppression (i.e. slavery, segregation, subordination of women, etc.), and to foment hatred and disrespect towards members of the household of faith on the basis of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, country of origin, and physical ability. This series entitled “Practicing Safe Text” is designed to sensitize believers to the ways in which we can distort the biblical witness by taking the scriptures out of context and projecting ideas onto the scriptures that are not the subject of the text. This leads to what I call, “Bible abuse,” the practice of uncritically using biblical prooftexts to further unexamined prejudices. This distorts the Word, dishonors God, and hinders the ability of the Church to spread the love and Good News of Jesus Christ to those who need it. The issue of the Church’s response to same gender loving people is just one example of the ways in which Christians have incorrectly and unjustly used the Bible to demean, degrade, and demonize fellow members of the human family. It has been assumed that the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality as an abomination against God. This series puts into question the certitude of such a claim.” – *Rev. Delman Coates, Senior Pastor Mt. Ennon Baptist Church*

**Recap from Part 1 – “Homosexuality” in the Old Testament:**

A close and careful reading of the story of Sodom & Gomorrah reveals that the cities were destroyed because the mob outside of Lot’s house desired to sexually violate or rape Lot’s guests. Proper treatment of guests was an important communal value in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah had become so morally depraved that they completely disregarded the communal standards regarding hospitality and how to treat guests. In order to ‘initiate’ outsiders into the community, the people of Sodom & Gomorrah sought to exert power over them to let them know who was in charge. This was done in the form of gang rape. One modern example of this kind of social-sexual initiation is the gang rape that happens today in prisons. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of this moral depravity; namely, forced, gang rape. Whether one regards the crowd in Sodom as all male, as is traditionally held, or as a mixed crowd as the text implies (cf. Gen. 19: 4, “all the **people** of Sodom”), gang rape is far from being a condemnation of (consensual) homosexuality as is commonly assumed. Rape is the issue here, not sexual orientation. Judges 19 involves a very similar story of sexual violence and heterosexual gang rape. But we would never say because the morally depraved offenders were heterosexual that heterosexual identity is being condemned. The issue is rape, not sexual orientation.

We also learned that male temple prostitution provides the best context for understanding Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The clearly stated context of Leviticus 18 and 20 has to do with prohibitions against participating in pagan cultic religious practices of the god Molech. Both Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 use the Hebrew word *zak(h)ar* translated “male” to refer to the object of the sexual act. While reading these chapters, the reader should notice that the text (in English or Hebrew) does not say “a man should not lie with a man.” Instead, the text uses a different word to refer to the object of the sexual act. The two passages clearly prohibit an Israelite “man” (*ish* in Hebrew) from lying with or having sex with a *zak(h)ar*. The word *zak(h)ar* means “a male,” and the context of the passage reveals that *zak(h)ar* refers to a “cultic male” or more specifically a male temple prostitute. This is a religious and a moral “abomination” that involves supporting the economic and sexual exploitation of the male temple prostitutes. Rather than being a condemnation of homosexuality (as evidenced by the fact that

there are no references to same sex relations between women), this text is prohibition about participating in this form of pagan cultic religious practice. Seeking to relate the prohibitions found in Leviticus to a later generation, Deuteronomy 23: 17-18, and 1 Kings 14: 23-24 make it clear that the concern had to do with prohibiting the Israelites from participating in pagan cultic rituals believed to involve temple prostitutes. Finally, for those who insist that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are prohibitions against homosexuality, the question becomes why do they ignore the other 600 commands in the book of Leviticus; including, commands against eating fat, pork, shellfish, and a host of other fowl and animals, against lying, cheating, having sexual relations with a woman while on her period, against wearing clothes with mixed fabrics, etc. Such “cherry picking” is a contradiction to the pretense of literal biblical interpretation that they claim to defend.

### “Homosexuality” in the New Testament

It is commonly held that the following New Testament texts represent clear condemnations of homosexuality. Does a careful examination of these text support this view? Let’s see...

#### **1 Timothy 1: 9-10**

<sup>9</sup>“...knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but [for *the* lawless and insubordinate,] [for *the* ungodly and for sinners,] [for *the* unholy and profane,] [for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers,]

<sup>10</sup> [for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers,] [for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine,]” (New King James Version)

In verses 9 and 10, Paul presents a list of people to whom God have the law. Notice that the list groups common things in structural pairs of two and three that are closely related in some way (see pairs in brackets above ). Verse 10 lists three words in a group that are commonly cited with regard to homosexuality. We must ask what do “fornicators, sodomites, and kidnappers” have in common and what practices are these words condemning? To answer this question we will need to explore the Greek words: *pornos*, *arsenokoites*, and *andrapodistes* respectively. *Pornos* derives from the verb *pernemi* meaning “to sell” and the following three definitions are given:

1. a male who prostitutes his body to another’s lust for hire
2. a male prostitute
3. a male who indulges in unlawful sexual intercourse, a fornicator

It is clear based upon context that *pornos* here refers to “a male prostitute.” In the Greco-Roman world, boys or young men were kept for the purposes of prostitution. The boys or young men were often groomed to appear as female. *Arsenokoites*, the second word, is made up of two Greek words for male (*arseno-*) and beds (*koites*). In Greek, the word *koitai*, literally meaning beds, is commonly used as a euphemism for one who has sex. *Arseno-* is an adjectival prefix, thus literally we could translate this as a “man who has sex” or “male bedder.” The contextual pairing with *pornos* makes it clear that *arsenokoites* is a man who has sex with the (boy/male) prostitute. *Andrapodistes*, the third word, returns the following definitions:

1. a slave-dealer, kidnapper, man-stealer
2. of one who unjustly reduces free males to slavery
3. of one who steals the slaves of others and sells them

What Paul is critiquing here are three related practices: a male prostitute (who is often a boy or young man), the man who “beds” or has sex with the male prostitute, and the slave dealer or sex trafficker of the boy prostitutes. This verse is a critique of a system of economic and sexual exploitation that were common during Paul’s time. It was a common practice for men of Paul’s time to have slave “pet” boys whom they sexually exploited. Dr. Ralph Blair explains, “The desired boys were prepubescent or at least without beards so that they seemed like

females. Today, this practice is referred to as pedophilia.” Based upon the syntactical and historical context of the passage, it is clear that Paul is referring to “male prostitutes, males who lie [with them], and slave dealers [who procure them].” English translations that use the term “practicing homosexuals” here distort the precise nature of the critique here. This text is not a critique of homosexuality proper speaking as is commonly taught.

### 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

#### New King James Version (NKJV)

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, **nor homosexuals, nor sodomites.**”

The Greek word incorrectly translated “homosexuals” in this translation is the word *malakoi*, and the Greek word translated “sodomites” here is the word *arsenokoitai*. The term *malakoi* is as an adjective that literally means “soft.” In Matthew 11:8 it was used as an adjective in reference to John the Baptist’s clothing. In this text, however, it is used as a noun to refer to young ‘soft’ prepubescent “pet” boys that adult men in the Greco-Roman world often supported financially, and exploited sexually. *Arsenokoitai* are men who sleep with these boy prostitutes who were made to appear ‘soft’ like women. Like 1 Timothy 1: 9-10, this text is a condemnation of the sexual and economic exploitation that came with (male) prostitution and pedophilia, and is far from being a critical of homosexuality. There is no doubt that the text is condemning same sex “acts,” but this is far from being a condemnation of same gender “orientation.” One, for example, can condemn heterosexual prostitution and the exploitation that comes with it without condemning heterosexual “orientation.”

These verses in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians are about the practice of prostitution and its related ancient practice of *pederasty*. Pederasty was a common ancient practice in Greek and Roman circles where in elite adult men cultivating intimate social and sexual relationships with young boys. While these relationships are unpleasant to detail, they were cultivated for a variety of reasons; including the promotion of educational development, to professional apprenticeships, to sordid extreme slave prostitution. (see Robin Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*). Today, we would call this pedophilia.

### Romans 1:24-27

24 Therefore God gave them up in the **lusts** of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a **lie** and **worshiped and served the creature** [idolatry] rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to **dishonorable passions**. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 27 and **the men likewise gave up natural relations** with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (RSV)

This passage is often cited as a clear reference condemning homosexuality as an “unnatural” lifestyle or sexual orientation. This view is based mainly upon a reading of verses 26 and 27 in which the reader assumes that homosexuality is the subject of the text. It is easy to overlook the true subject of the passage because the presumed “anti-gay” interpretation has been ingrained in our minds through poor teaching.

Paul is writing to the “saints” in Rome (v. 7) regarding his desire to travel to that city to encourage the believers there and build up their faith. (v. 8-17) It is important for the reader to understand that the focus of chapter 1 is idolatry or idol worship in Rome (v. 18-23), and the consequences of worshipping pagan idols and participating in pagan cultic/religious practices. (v. 24-32). Six times between verses 18-32 Paul states the subjects

“exchanged,” “gave up,” or “changed” from one state to another (cf. v. 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28). This subtle observation is significant because a person cannot “exchange” or “give up” what they do not have. This means the subject went from one state to another. Therefore, the text is clearly about believers, “saints,” who went from believing in the true God to worshipping pagan idols (cf. v. 23 and 25). Pagan idol worship involved participation in the cultic sex orgies that were a common part of the fertility rituals (cf. v. 24 and 26, ‘uncleanness,’ ‘lusts,’ ‘vile passions’). During these cultic sex orgies, people would have sex without regard for familial bonds, gender, or age. Paul wants to get to Rome because the “saints” there are being drawn away from the faith into idol worship. There was a lot of social and cultural pressure (especially for elites) to join pagan religious associations/temples. If you wanted to advance socially, professionally, and economically, joining these pagan religious associations was what you had to do to be accepted. The price for entrance into this world was that people (1) exchanged their theological beliefs, and (2) exchanged their natural sexual orientation in order to participate in the cultic sex orgies (cf. v. 26b-27). Paul did not write this text to or about who were born or who identify as homosexual. The text is written to heterosexual men and women who, filled with lust and idolatrous passions, “exchanged” their natural sexual orientation as a heterosexual in order to participate in the cultic sex orgies which could involve same sex acts. These same sex acts would be ‘unnatural’ for these heterosexuals. But the pressure was so great to fit in socially and culturally, they engaged in these acts in order to be socially accepted. They were willing to “give up” their natural orientation to do what is “unnatural” (for them). Following the clear logic and focus of the text, it could be argued that it would be “unnatural” for a person who is born homosexual to engage in heterosexual relations. It would be overreaching to equate participation in such same sex acts for the purposes of idol worship with same gender orientation. Same sex acts that occur in prison is a good example for illustrative purposes. Some people may participate in same sex acts in prison because of the circumstances of their confinement, but upon release return to their natural heterosexual behavior. The same sex “acts” performed while in prison are not necessarily the same as a same gender orientation. Isolating verses 26-27 to condemn homosexual relations as unnatural is projecting a bias into the text and taking these verses out of context.

Additional Reading: **Justin Cannon**, *The Bible, Christianity, & Homosexuality*; **Robin Scroggs**, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*; **Jennifer Knust**, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible’s Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire*; **Daniel Helminiak**, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*; **Peter Gomes**, *The Good Book*.

NEXT WEEK: So what does all of this mean for us as individuals and as a congregation, and did Jesus have anything to say on this subject? Stay tuned....

### **Have questions for next week?**

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