The English word “homosexual” is a derivative of two words, the Greek word *homo*, meaning “same,” and the Latin word *sexus* meaning “sex.” “Homosexual,” therefore, means same-sex activity, male with male, or female with female. In contemporary parlance male homosexuals are often called “gays,” and female homosexuals “lesbians.” The word “homosexual” is of relative modern origin, having been first coined about 1890. English translations of the Bible naturally do not use this modern term. The Scriptures are nevertheless acquainted with same-sex activity, and on each occasion where it is referred to it is condemned. The following is an examination and evaluation of the relevant biblical evidence on the subject.

**Old Testament**

_Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13_

The most explicit and important reference to homosexuality in the Old Testament occurs in the Holiness Code of Leviticus. Leviticus 18:22 specifically states, “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” The commandment is repeated in Leviticus 20:13, with the prescription of the death penalty for its infraction, “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.” In the Leviticus 18 passage the mention of homosexuality occurs in contexts of gross immorality: the verse preceding the prohibition of homosexuality in 18:22 forbids child sacrifice, and the verse following forbids bestiality. Moreover, in both passages male homosexuality is called an “abomination.” The Hebrew word for “abomination,” הָּבֵית (tohevha), means an object of loathing. It is the strongest condemnation in the Old Testament for violations of an ethical and religious nature.

**Objection:** Some argue that הָּבֵית (tohevha) refers to ritual (i.e., Jewish cultic infractions) as opposed to moral violations incumbent on all persons. They argue, for example, that the prohibition against homosexuality in Leviticus is analogous to the prohibitions against eating pork or having sexual intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period. If these commandments have lost their validity for us today, why should the prohibition of homosexuality be maintained?

**Response:** The Old Testament does not place homosexuality in the category of ritual or cultic infractions. הָּבֵית (tohevha) occurs in Leviticus only in 18:22, 26, 27, 29, 30, and 20:13, where it refers to the gross immorality of the Canaanites. The Greek translation of the term in the Septuagint, βδελυγμα (bdelygma), also means something detestable, arousing God’s wrath. It too is reserved for grievous moral offenses. Moreover, the same word for “abomination” occurs in a list of Gentile sins in the Apocrypha in Wisdom of Solomon 12:23, which indicates that βδελυγμα (bdelygma), like הָּבֵית (tohevha), is used with reference to human moral offenses, not Jewish cultic violations. (For further examples, see Deut. 12:31; 18:9, 12; 20:18; 1 Kings 14:24; 2 Kings 16:3; 21:2; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:2; 36:14; Isa. 44:19.)

The Reformed theological tradition, in particular, differentiates between cultic laws and moral laws in the Old Testament, the former being fulfilled in Christ, the latter retaining their moral force. This is evident in Scripture itself. Jesus, for example, permitted the eating of unclean foods (Mark 7), but he upheld the heterosexual model of creation (Mark 10:6-9). It is equally significant that although ritual prohibitions in the Old Testament are often ignored or violated by the early church, the prohibition against homosexuality is never questioned, but repeated and maintained in the New Testament and early church.
Other Old Testament Texts

In addition to these explicit prohibitions of homosexuality, the Old Testament elsewhere describes homosexual acts in equally reprehensible terms.

**Genesis 19 and Judges 19**

Genesis 19 and Judges 19 describe attempted homosexual gang rapes. Genesis 19:4-8 reads,

Before the men 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, that we may know them.’ Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, ‘No, my friends. Do not do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But do not do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.’

Similarly, Judges 19:22-24 reads,

While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, ‘Bring out the man who came to your house so we may know him.’ The owner of the house went outside and said to them, ‘No, my friends, do not act so wickedly; seeing that this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, do not do such a disgraceful thing.’

**Objection:** Despite the plain meaning of these passages, a revisionist interpretation argues that the sin described here is not one of homosexuality but one of inhospitality. The supposed inhospitality consisted either in Lot’s having received and entertained two foreigners whose intentions might be hostile toward the community (since Lot was himself a foreigner), or in the inhospitality of the men of the town toward the strangers, or in both. The verb “to know,” it is argued, does not carry sexual connotations in Genesis 19 and Judges 19, but only the intent to become acquainted with the strangers.

**Response:** This interpretation is unpersuasive. It is highly questionable, first of all, whether inhospitality was forbidden as a sin in the Torah, and its punishment was certainly not ordained in the destruction of a city. More importantly, context and vocabulary in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 clearly indicate an attempted homosexual assault on the guests, since both stories indicate that the aggressors were (or would have been) satisfied by the surrendering of women to be sexually molested. The verb “to know” is a translation of the Hebrew [דָּעַת (yada)], which in Genesis 4:1, for instance, carries sexual connotations. That is the clear meaning of the verb in Genesis 19:8 in reference to the “daughters who have not known a man”; the context of Genesis 19:5 likewise demands the meaning of a (homo)sexual assault. In Genesis 19:7 Lot begs the men of Sodom not to do this wicked ([נָא, tareu]) thing. These observations vigorously deny the suggestion that the men simply wanted to become acquainted with the strangers. Finally, in Genesis 19:13 the outcry of God against Sodom is so great that the city is destroyed. The same is also true in the Judges passage. In Judges 19:22 the Hebrew verb is also [דָּעַת (yada)], again with homosexual connotations. And in v. 23 the deed is called ([נָא, tareu], “a wicked thing.”

Further references to Sodom’s sins frequently allude to or mention the sin of homosexuality. Jude 7 castigates the Sodomites who “indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust (Greek = “other flesh”). Second Peter 2:7 refers to Genesis 19 with the expression, “the licentiousness of the lawless.” The Greek word for “licentiousness,” ἀσελγεία (aselgeia), is a strong term describing debauchery, sexual excesses, and brutality. In Ezekiel 16:46-50 Sodom is cited as a model of moral corruption, whose sin is called “abominable.”

Extra-biblical texts similarly refer to Sodom’s homosexual sin. The Testament of Naphtali 3:4-5, in the Pseudepigrapha, warns not to “become like Sodom which departed from the order of nature.” The first
century Jewish philosopher Philo (On Abraham 133-136) vigorously condemns Sodom, where “men mounted males without respect for the sex nature.” The Jewish historian Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews 1.200-201) speaks of the “Sodomites…outrage to the youthful beauty” of the men Lot had received under his roof. The homosexual attack is alluded to in 3 Maccabees 2:5, where “the people of Sodom . . . were notorious for their vices,” and in Jubilees 16:6, which refers to “the pollution of Sodom.”

The church fathers, likewise, regarded the “Sodomites’ offense, like that of the men of Gibeah (Judg. 19:22) [as a] demand for carnal knowledge of a neighbor’s guests” (M. Pope, “Homosexuality,” Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible [Supl], 415). The divine displeasure with Sodom is signaled by its annihilation, which, incidentally, appears throughout the Biblical tradition as the symbol par excellence of divine vengeance (e.g., Matt. 10:15; 11:23-24; Luke 10:12, Rom. 9:29, and elsewhere in Philo and Josephus).

The attempted homosexual assaults in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 were not the extent of the sins committed, of course, as the subsequent rape of the women indicates. In the corrupt moral climate of Sodom, however, the rape of women was viewed as the lesser of two evils in comparison to a homosexual assault.

Deuteronomy 22:5
Deuteronomy 22:5 also bears a relationship to our subject. The text reads, “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination (הָבֵא, tohahvath) to the Lord your God.” The mention of transvestitism and its association with “abomination” is likely a reference to sexual inversion (see M. Pope, IDB[Supl], 416).

Deuteronomy 23:17-18
Deuteronomy 23:17-18 is also a relevant text.

Let there not be a female temple prostitute among the daughters of Israel, and let there not be a male temple prostitute (הָבֵא, kahdesh) among the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot (כַּזְנָח, zohnach), or the wages of a dog (כֵּל, kelev) into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow; for both of these are an abomination (הָבֵא, tohahvath) to the Lord your God.

Objection: It is sometimes suggested that this text does not refer to homosexuality, but only that it forbids Israelites from participating in Canaanite fertility cults.

Response: The rabbinic tradition was agreed that Deuteronomy 23:17 referred to passive sodomy (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 54a-54b), although opinions varied whether it was punishable by death. Deuteronomy 23:17-18 must be read in conjunction with 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46, and 2 Kings 23:7, all of which allude to the presence of cultic prostitution, including male prostitution, in Jerusalem in the ninth, eighth, and seventh centuries B.C. These texts, along with 1 Kings 15:13, suggest that the queen mother maintained a fertility cult to the goddess Asherah in the Jerusalem temple (see S. Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult of Ancient Israel,” JBL 112/3 (1993) 385-401). The following points are worthy of mention in connection with this evidence. First, since temple worship in Israel was limited to males, male cult prostitutes or “dogs” would have to refer to homosexual cult practices. Second, although homosexual practices were obviously infertile, homosexual copulation (along with heterosexual copulation) was apparently believed to effect fertility in a magical way. Finally, and most importantly, the reform effort associated with King Josiah (and Deuteronomy is generally associated with that reform) strenuously and systematically uprooted these sexual cult practices.
Note I:
Homosexuality and the Order of Creation

The argument that homosexuality is a God-given orientation or lifestyle, as is commonly asserted today, cannot be considered apart from reference to the order of creation in Genesis 1-2. Genesis 1:26 states that humanity is created in the image of God, and that being male and female reflect that image. The argument is frequently heard today that a sexual act is moral insofar as it expresses true affection between consenting individuals and gives pleasure to them. This is, however, neither a Biblical nor a moral argument, for as such it can be used to justify, in addition to homosexuality, adultery, group sex, sex with children, and even sex with animals. It defines a human person simply as a sentient being, which leads to a disembodied kind of love, whereas the image of God that is expressed in maleness and femaleness assumes a distinctiveness and continuity of self, sexual nature, and moral activity. The Apostle Paul, as we shall see, in fact appeals to this design in creation when he discusses the aberration of homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27.

God created the human race not in uniformity, but of complementary sexes, male and female, whose union is described as “one flesh.” Heterosexual union, as guarded and preserved in the covenant of marriage, is not simply a human choice or one variety of sexual union among many, but an order of creation. It is a holy vocation in the sense that only this form of union allows humanity to fulfill God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Male and female thus find their mutual fulfillment, as well as their procreative function, in their complementary opposite, a teaching that is reaffirmed in the New Testament in Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:6-8; and 1 Corinthians 11:7, 9.

It is often observed that Jesus made no pronouncement regarding homosexuality. It is sometimes inferred from this that homosexuality was therefore of no moral concern to our Lord. It should be noted, however, that on the question of marriage in Mark 10 Jesus corrected the liberal divorce policy of the tradition of the elders, which appealed to the Torah (Deut. 24:1,3), by citing God’s design and purpose for marriage between one man and one woman in Genesis 1-2. If, according to Mark 10:6-12, the only alternative to faithful heterosexual marriage that Jesus permitted was that of celibacy, how probable is it that he would have accepted homosexual marriage, which was unequivocally repudiated in the Old Testament and Judaism?

Note II:
Cultural Attitudes toward Homosexuality in the Ancient Near East

It is often asserted that ethical teachings in the Bible, and specifically teaching regarding homosexuality, are culturally conditioned, i.e., that they were biased by the culture(s) in which the Israelites and early Christians lived, and hence cannot be regarded as absolutes for our day. The following evidence dispels this notion in the case of homosexuality.

In Mesopotamia, legal texts virtually ignore homosexual acts;

Among the Hittites, there was apparently no prohibition of homosexual acts;
In Ugarit, no information is available on the subject;

In Egypt, pederasty (adult males engaging in sexual intercourse with boys) was disapproved, but otherwise homosexuality was evidently not proscribed;

In Greece, homosexuality was as a rule viewed (and promoted) as a higher form of sexuality (e.g., Plato’s Symposium).
In Rome, the Greek norm was adopted and carried to more decadent extremes, although the Stoic ideal of monogamy attempted to counterbalance otherwise widespread moral degeneracy.

As this review indicates, the Ancient Near East was ambivalent or permissive regarding the issue of homosexuality, and sometimes affirmative of it. The Biblical position on homosexuality does not reflect cultural norms, but more often than not opposes them. It is thus erroneous to assert that the Bible’s position on this question is culturally determined.

New Testament

*I Corinthians 6:9-10*

The earliest New Testament text bearing on homosexuality is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10,

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Neither fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Two terms in the above text deserve attention. The first is μαλακοί (*malakoi*), which the NRSV translates “male prostitutes.” The denotation of μαλακοί (*malakoi*) in Greek literature is “soft,” such as soft garments worn by fastidious people (Luke 7:25). It can, however, carry a connotation, as it does here, of “soft” persons or passive homosexual partners, specifically “men and boys who allow themselves to be misused homosexually” (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 489 [including a list of references in secular Greek literature where μαλακοί (*malakoi*) carries the same meaning]). The recent *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (2.381) defines μαλακός (*malakos*) in 1 Corinthians 6:9 as “reprehensible examples of passive homosexuality.” The translation of this term in the Latin Vulgate, *mollis*, carries a corresponding sense. The presence of πορνοί (*pornoi*, fornication) and μοιχοί (*moichoi*, adultery) in this passage clearly indicates that μαλακός (*malakoi*) is to be understood in the sense of sexual immorality.

The second term is ἀρσενοκοίται (*arsenokoitai*), which the NRSV translates, “sodomites,” a term deriving from the infamy of Sodomy described in Genesis l9. Although this is the first occurrence of the term in Greek literature, there can be no doubt about its meaning. A compound word, ἀρσενοκοίται (*arsenokoitai*) means “(males) going to bed (or copulating) with males.”

Objection: It is sometimes argued that the above two terms condemn only pederasty, i.e., sex between an adult male and a “call boy,” rather than homosexuality between consenting adults.

Response: A number of scholars have argued convincingly that Paul coined ἀρσενοκοίται (*arsenokoitai*) from the presence of two adjacent words in Leviticus 20:13 (ἀρσενὸς κοίτην, *arsenos koiten;* see D. Malick, “The Condemnation of Homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 [1993] 479-492). Leviticus 20:13, it will be recalled, is the strongest prohibition of homosexuality in the Old Testament. If, as appears likely, the Apostle Paul has this text in mind in utilizing ἀρσενοκοίται (*arsenokoitai*) in 1 Corinthians 6:9, then the term cannot be limited simply to the Greek practice of pederasty, as John Boswell and others argue, but must be seen as an all-encompassing condemnation of homosexuality (as in Lev. 20:13), including consenting adult homosexual relationships. Hence, Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich (p. 109) correctly define the term as “a male homosexual, pederast, sodomite,” as do Liddell, Scott, and Jones in the definitive *Greek-English Lexicon* (p. 246). The *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (1.158) defines the term as “referring to a male who engages in sexual activity with men or boys.”
The term appears again in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 1:10 where it is paired with πορνοί (pornoi, fornicators), again establishing an illicit sexual practice. A century after Paul (about A.D. 155), ἀρσενοκοίται (arsenokoitai) was used by Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, in his epistle to the Philippians (5:3) warning young men “to cut themselves off from the lust of the world.” Polycarp then quotes 1 Corinthians 6:9, and refers to the behaviors described therein as “iniquity” (ατοπα, atopa). The Latin Vulgate translates ἀρσενοκοίται (arsenokoitai) as masculorum concubitores, which, according to Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary, means “the lying together or copulation of men.” Cassell’s includes passages from Cicero and Vergil where it carries this same sense.

**Romans 1:26-27**

The most unequivocal condemnation of homosexuality in the New Testament occurs in Romans 1:26-27,

> Therefore God handed them over to dishonorable passions, their women exchanged the natural drive for the unnatural drive (χρησὶς, chresis = “relations” or “functions,” especially of sexual intercourse), likewise also the men, having left the natural desire for women burned in their desire for one another, men for men, working out the shamefulness and receiving the just punishment that their error (or wandering) necessarily caused.

**Objection:** It is sometimes suggested that this passage is not a condemnation of homosexuality per se, but of persons who “exchange” their natural heterosexual orientation for homosexual acts.

**Response:** This view wrongly projects the modern concept of personality orientation onto the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul does not address the origins, motivations, or gratifications of homosexuality, including the modern concept of “sexual orientation.” Arguments from such causes, whatever their biological, psychological, or sociological merit, would simply have been seen by the Apostle as further manifestations of the power of sin to confuse and blind human thinking (Rom. 1:28). The proscription here, as everywhere in Scripture, refers solely to homosexual acts.

Romans 1:26-27 actually broadens the biblical condemnation of homosexuality to include the practice of lesbianism. In Romans 1:26-27 homosexuality is cited not because it is worse than other sins, but because it illustrates the problem of idolatry in 1:18-32. As Gentiles “exchanged” the truth of God for a lie and worshiped the creation instead of the Creator, so lesbianism and homosexuality “exchange” a natural relationship for an unnatural one. Idolatry and homosexuality, in other words, represent theological and moral rebellion against God. The failure to worship and glorify God results in idolatry, and the failure to find one’s sexual fulfillment in the opposite sex results in homosexuality. Idolatry and homosexuality inevitably result in an inversion or turning back on self for a fulfillment that God intended to be completed by the other. The result is alienation from God.

That “unnatural relations” (παρὰ φυσίν, para phusin) carries the sense of something contrary to the order of nature is evinced by its usage again in the analogy of the olive tree in Romans 11. There Paul writes that Gentiles “were cut off from their natural stock (κατὰ φυσίν, kata phusin) of the wild olive tree and ingrafted into the unnatural (παρὰ φυσίν, para phusin) cultured olive tree” (Rom. 11:24). Not surprisingly, παρὰ φυσίν (para phusin) becomes used for homosexuality in several subsequent Greek writers (see Athenagoras [13]; Philo [On Abraham 135-136, On Special Laws 3.39 preserves a stinging rebuke of pederasty as the “pursuit of unnatural pleasure,” τὴν παρὰ φυσίν ἡδονὴν διόκει; Plutarch [Dialogue on Love 751-752]; Dio Chrysostom [Discourse 7.135, 151-152]; Josephus [Against Apion 2.199, 273, 275]; and the Testament of Naphtali [3:3-4]).
Note III:
Why are References to Homosexuality Relatively Infrequent in the Bible?

The frequency (or infrequency) of a statement is not necessarily an indication of its importance. Marriage vows, to take but one example, are said only once, but few will want to argue from this that they are of little importance. Nevertheless, it is often argued that because homosexuality is mentioned relatively infrequently in the Bible that it was relatively unimportant, and should be regarded so today.

This is an unwarranted conclusion. For one, the Hebrew tradition showed reticence and restraint with regard to explicit sexual references. Whenever possible, it employed euphemisms (e.g., the verb “to know”) in order to avoid references to genitalia and to genital acts. This same reticence applied to acts of same sex intercourse.

Second, and more importantly, same-sex activity stood in obvious variance to the design of creation, wherein male and female become “one flesh,” in both pleasure and procreation. The scarcity of references, in other words, is exactly what we would expect in a tradition that universally affirmed the God-givenness of heterosexuality and deplored deviations from that norm. Other acts that the Old Testament regarded as deplorable (e.g., child sacrifice) are mentioned no more frequently than homosexuality. This same argument, incidentally, applies to the relative infrequent mention of homosexuality in modern reference works. To cite but two examples. The fifteen-volume New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge (1912; supplemental volumes, 1955) contains no entry on the subject of homosexuality. Again, Oxford University Press’s two-volume Encyclopedia of the Early Church (1992!) contains no entry on the subject. Surely few will argue that the omission of the subject in these works is due to the fact that homosexuality is either widely approved, or of little moral importance. The answer, rather, is that it has been considered self-evident that the Judeo-Christian tradition always and everywhere condemned the practice of homosexuality. Hence the point needed not be re-established or elaborated. The reason homosexuality is under discussion today is not because the Scriptures are unclear on the subject, but because modern sexual practices have radically changed.

A third reason for the relative infrequency of the subject relates to the ethnic environment in which the biblical writings arose and to which they were addressed. A general pattern can be observed. Where biblical authors were writing to Jews living in a Jewish environment, references to homosexuality are relatively infrequent. The reason for this is because homosexuality was (and still is) a rare phenomenon in Jewish society, and hence posed little problem. The pattern changes, however, when Judeo-Christian authors began to address their counterparts in the Hellenistic Diaspora where homosexuality was widely practiced, and where it threatened the purity of faith and life. This explains the vastly increased number of condemnations of homosexuality in the extra-Biblical books of the Pseudepigrapha during the intertestamental period, which by and large were addressed to faith communities in the Diaspora (e.g., Pseudo-Phocylides 3; Sibylline Oracles 2.73; 3.185; 3.596; 4.34; 2 Enoch 34.2; Jubilees 13:18; 16:5-6; 20:5; 3 Maccabees 2:5; Pseudo-Philo 8:2; 45:1-6; and in the Testaments of Naphtali 3:5; Isaac 5:27; and Jacob 7:19-20). Each of these references expressly prohibits and condemns the practice of homosexuality.

A similar pattern is evident in the New Testament. Thus, Jesus, who moved in a predominantly Jewish milieu, made no reference to homosexuality, whereas Paul, who ministered in a Hellenistic milieu, makes specific reference to it in obvious places like Corinth and Rome. This pattern persists in the extra-Biblical books of the New Testament Apocrypha. The Apocalypse of Peter (32), for example, which probably arose in Egypt in the first half of the second century, contains the following passage: “There is no rest from torture, [for those] who defiled their bodies, behaving like women. And the women with them, these were those who behaved with one another as men with a woman.”
A survey of the biblical and extra-biblical evidence regarding homosexuality results in a massive and unqualified condemnation of the practice. Richard Hays rightly summarizes the evidence thus: “Every pertinent Christian text from the pre-Constantinian period . . . adopts an unremittingly negative judgment on homosexual practice, and this tradition is emphatically carried forward by all major Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries” (“A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” JRE 14/1 (1986) 202).

Note IV: Homosexuality and Idolatry

Along with the increase in references to homosexuality in biblical and extra-biblical works directed to the Diaspora, there is a similar tendency in the same works to refer to homosexuality in conjunction with idolatry. This is, as we have seen, the case in Romans 1:18-32, and is more often than not the case in the texts cited above. Idolatry was regarded as the single greatest threat to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The mention of homosexuality in conjunction with idolatry thus indicates its seriousness as a moral offense in the eyes of that tradition.

Note V: Homosexual Orientation and Moral Accountability

Many homosexuals claim that they have no awareness of having chosen homosexuality. A conclusion sometimes drawn from this is that the individual has no capacity to choose sexual orientation, and hence that sexual orientation is beyond moral prescriptions, including those of Scripture.

“Sexual orientation,” as noted earlier, is a modern concept that is alien to Scripture. The biblical and extra-biblical texts cited above refer solely to sexual practices. The gospel does not address sin at the level of creation, but at the level of redemption. That is to say, Scripture does not give conclusive answers as to why things are the way they are in the world, but it does speak of their transformation by the power of God. Thus, although human beings do not choose the state into which they are born, they do have a choice over how they respond to their state. Hence, a predisposition or orientation toward a certain course of action does not produce a “right” to do it, or justify acting upon it. The current state of behavioral research indicates that sexual orientation is more a function of post-natal psycho-social development than of biological constitution. Human sexual behavior is the product of a network of interacting factors, and human choice cannot be eliminated as one of them.

Whatever the ultimate causes of homosexuality, the church should not fall into the error of thinking of homosexuality as a behavior that cannot be resisted. “It must be made quite clear that the genuine invert is not necessarily given to homosexual practices, and may exercise as careful control over his or her physical impulses as the heterosexual” (Derrick Sherwin Bailey, Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition [London: Archon Books, 1975], p. xi). This salutary statement was written by a scholar who advocated homosexual causes. To be human means to be able to make moral choices. The gospel does not make moral demands that believers cannot fulfill, and that includes the biblical proscriptions against homosexual practices.

The gospel assures believers of forgiveness and grace as they struggle with sin. Paul establishes grounds for this hope immediately following mention of homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9. “And that is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul states, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” Again, in Galatians 5:1, Paul speaks of Christian freedom as receiving God’s gracious word of justification, and of a subsequent reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit and resistance to the works of the flesh.
Conclusion

Without fail, biblical and extra-biblical sources condemn the practice of homosexuality. There is no text in Judeo-Christian literature from Leviticus to Constantine that condones it. This should be sufficient and compelling evidence against accepting the practice of homosexuality as a gift of God, or as an alternative and morally justifiable lifestyle. Churches, particularly those whose creedal traditions assent to the authority of Scripture, must give full weight to the scriptural position on this subject in both their teaching and in the ordering of their life. The above evidence argues that the church cannot ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals to the offices of ministry and maintain fidelity to Scripture and creeds.

At the same time, the gospel requires love and understanding of persons of homosexual lifestyle, and the offering of all available help to those who desire it. Persons of homosexual inclination who choose to remain celibate and resist their temptations through faith, prayer, and abstinence have every right to the sacraments and offices of the church, including ordination, that are open to every other sinner who, by God’s grace, struggles against sin and relinquishes his or her life to the transformation of the gospel.

Reprinted with permission from Theology Matters, May/June 1995 and March/April 1996

Dr. James R. Edwards is professor of Theology at Whitworth College and a PCUSA Minister of Word and Sacrament.