

Did God Actually Say? Hearing God's Voice on Homosexuality From the Storyline of Scripture

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There's a video on YouTube that has received nearly 700,000 views. Penguins, cats, and babies best that every day. Hour-long lectures on texts from Leviticus, Romans, and 1 Corinthians don't. As a new Harvard student and professing Christian, Matthew Vines was amazed at the openness to homosexuality he witnessed on Harvard's campus. So, he took a year off of school to settle the question of what the Bible teaches on the subject. The video he uploaded to YouTube is his manifesto, and it resonates with an audience large enough to land him a book deal on the same subject.¹

What did he learn? His conclusion about "traditional" Christians and their view of homosexuality sums it up:

You are taking a few verses out of context and extracting from them an absolute condemnation that was never intended. But you are also striking to the very core of another human being and gutting them of their sense of dignity and of self-worth. You are reinforcing the message that gay people have heard for centuries: You will always be alone. You come from a family, but you'll never form one of your own. You are uniquely unworthy of loving and being loved by another person, and all because you're different, because you're gay.²

Vines is right that the Bible is important and that we should read every verse in context. And he is also right to suggest that getting the Bible wrong harms people.

But do Christians who believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality really arrive at that conclusion by taking a few verses out of context? Does this interpretation gut those with same-sex attraction of their dignity and worth as human beings? Does believing this resign those with same-sex attraction to a life of loveless isolation? We should want to know. We must give an answer (1 Pet 3:15).

What Did God Actually Say?

Today, we want to answer the question, "What has God said about homosexuality?"³ One way to answer this question is to study specific instances of the mention of "homosexuality" in Scripture. Matthew Vines takes this approach. By contrast, I will show how the framework of the entire Bible, not just a collection of proof-texts, presents heterosexual marriage as the normative context for sexual intimacy and the reason why same-sex marriage cannot be condoned by Christians who love God and their neighbor.⁴

We might think this question is out of our league, especially when scholars disagree.⁵ But, as we will see, God's Word when read in the context of God's whole Bible, is not confusing but clear.

Creation: God's Design for Human Sexuality

Everyone has an account for the meaning of gender, marriage, and sexuality. Christians, though, believe in a revealed morality in a world made a certain way and for a certain purpose—ultimately, the glory of God. Our sexual ethic begins in Genesis 1 and 2.

God created man in his own image ... male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" ... Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (Gen 1:27–28; 2:18)

Even in Eden the man needed a complementary woman. To evince this need, God paraded various animals before Adam, none a suitable helper. Only then did God put Adam to sleep and make a woman out of his side. When Adam awoke he expressed his delight:

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken
out of Man." (Gen 2:23)

It is in this context that God gave us his sexual ethic:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Gen 2:24–25)

We learn at least five things from Genesis 1–2.⁶

First, we learn that God made two genders. We come in two bio-forms: male and female. Accordingly, gender is not a social construct developed later. It is determined by creation, and it is delimited to two sexes.⁷

Second, these two kinds of human beings complement one another. Though both individually made in the image of God, they can only fulfill their "mis-

sion" of filling the earth with the glory of God by means of sexual partnerships held together in the bonds of covenant marriage.⁸

Third, when a man and woman come together, they multiply. One purpose of human sexuality is to unite man and woman and to bring new life into the world. So while marriage is about more than procreation, it is nonetheless oriented toward the gift of children, the fruit of their union.⁹

Fourth, marriage unites man and woman in a complementary, comprehensive, exclusive, and permanent union. Human beings are to leave father and mother, and cleave to one another. Friendships come and go with varying degrees of closeness and commitment. Marriage is always a whole-human, whole-life union.

Fifth, gender, sexuality, and marriage are real, good, and beautiful. What God made was "very good." The man and the woman were naked and not ashamed.

This is how it is. Or, perhaps we should say, this is how it *was*. Because of the fall, none of us knows this perfection firsthand. And those who experience same-sex attraction must wonder if they live in a parallel universe. To ascertain what happened to this original design, we must consider what came next in the biblical storyline.

Fall: Our Universal Problem with Sex

In the fall, God tells us what went wrong with humanity. In Genesis 3, a new character enters the story.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?' ... 'You will not surely die.'" (vv. 1, 4)

God said, "Eat and die" (cf. Gen 2:17). The serpent said, "Eat and live." Adam and Eve trusted the serpent and ate.

When God called them to account, Adam blamed his wife, and Eve blamed the serpent. The first marriage was on the rocks. And now, as a result of their sin and God's ensuing curse, human sexu-

ality would be forever changed.

To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16)

God cursed Adam with trouble working the ground and with the promise that he would one day return to the ground. Finally, “He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:24). As a result, God’s image-bearers entered a world outside Eden without God and with hearts ready to invent sin, especially sexual sin.¹⁰ Genesis 3 teaches at least three things about sex after the fall.

First, it teaches us that Adam’s sin changed everything. Our problems are not because we came off the line bad. Humans broke bad. There are things about us that are broken, bent, and bad because we are not what we were made to be (Eccl 7:29). If you don’t struggle with same-sex attraction, you are nonetheless plagued by sexual sin or the inward corruption of sexual desires.

Second, men and women, after the fall, are ashamed. Adam and Eve hid from one another and from God. The plants in Eden were meant to reveal God’s goodness, not to hide our shame. And yet, fig leaves were used by Adam and Eve as a cover for nakedness.

Third, men and women are at odds. As a consequence of the fall, women will desire the place of their husband, and husbands will be constantly tempted to rule over their wives. One explanation for some cases of same-sex desire is a disordered relationship between sexes in a fallen world.

We could list many more ramifications, but it is enough to say that every aspect of human sexuality has been corrupted by the fall. Accordingly, God gave instructions (i.e., *torah*) about human sexuality.¹¹ These laws mitigated the effects of sexual sin and taught Israel (and the church) how to glorify God with their sexuality. We must consider these instructions, but only on the way to offering something more powerful in the gospel message—

namely, pardon for sexual sin and power to live a holy life in Christ.

Torah: Good Laws for Sexual Sinners

The rest of the Bible is written in response to Genesis 3. And as it relates to human sexuality, it is filled with commands concerning sexual conduct. In what follows, we will consider three passages that demonstrate how the biblical narrative esteems sexual purity through a consistent sexual ethic that is rooted in creation’s design and accords with God’s holy nature.

Leviticus 18:20–23 Reveals the Extent of Human Sexual Immorality

Although Moses addresses sexual immorality before the book of Leviticus (e.g., Genesis 19 or Genesis 37; Exod 20:14, 17), Leviticus 18 is a primary passage for explaining God’s view of sex.

And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor’s wife and so make yourself unclean with her. You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion. (Lev 18:20–23)

In these four verses, three realities are evident.

First, it teaches us that East of Eden, men and women don’t always want to pursue one-flesh unions. These commands were given because human beings actually desire to do these things. We are now born wanting to unite with all kinds of things.

Second, departures from God’s creation design are perversions. That is, our wants are wrapped around the wrong things. And we’re all sexual sinners. That your struggle with sexual temptation may be common doesn’t mean it’s normal or life-giving. There was no lust in the garden, but in the graveyard of the world there is all sorts of necrophilia, (i.e., sexual desire for the spiritually dead and dying).

Third, perversions are abominations because they deny the greatness and goodness of God. God is the LORD, and his name is not to be profaned. It is a cosmic insult for a man or woman to reject God's gift of a divinely designed complement.

Before we move on from Leviticus, we need to answer a common question. We keep God's command about homosexuality, but what about his commands for farming, clothing, and food?

While Leviticus was written *for us*, it was not written immediately *to us*. Leviticus is written to the nation of Israel under the Mosaic covenant. The Lord gave Israel commands to govern her life as a nation, and these commands served a variety of purposes. Some were intended to remind the people that they were separated from the nations and belonged to the Lord. At every meal and with every change of clothes they would have a reminder.¹² But some commands were clearly tied to the nature of God and God's creation, such as commands concerning murder, or theft, or sexual immorality. The command, "you shall not lie with a male as with a woman," comes with a reason tied to Genesis 1–2. This text from the Old Testament in Leviticus is important, but it is not all we have.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 Reveals the Cost of Sexual Immorality

In a letter that cites the Mosaic Law to endorse the practice of "purg[ing] the evil person from among you" for sins such as incest (1 Cor 5:13), Paul writes in the next chapter.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9–10)

What does 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 teach us? We don't need to reflect long on this one. Those who practice unrighteousness, which includes homosexuality, will not enter the kingdom. The unrighteous who love their lives more than God,

will go to hell because they did not repent and lose their lives for the sake of Christ (cf. Matt 10:39). Still, Paul's most explicit teaching on homosexuality is not in 1 Corinthians but Romans.

Romans 1:24–32 Reveals the True Impulses behind Sexual Immorality

Beginning his massive exposé of sin (Rom 1:18–3:23), Paul shows how sin at its root is a matter of idolatry. He writes in Romans 1:24–32:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring 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 dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 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 themselves the due penalty for their error.

...They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness ... Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Romans 1 teaches us at least five things about the nature of sin, in general, and homosexuality, in particular.

First, we learn that God made the world so that certain things would be plain. So clear are God's "invisible attributes" in "the things that have been made," that Paul can say, "they are without excuse" (vv. 20–21). Paul also speaks of "natural relations" between men and women (v. 27). In Paul's mind (and in the mind of his audience) there exists an "obviousness" about the way human sexuality works.

Second, in sin, humans reject God's divine design. In Romans 1:18 Paul says that we "suppress the truth" in our unrighteousness. More than just rejecting

what seems obvious, sinful humanity rejects God's created order ("the truth"). The truth is unappealing to the unrighteous, and so they "exchange" it for a lie (Rom 1:24). This has many effects, but sexual sin is one of the most evident.

Third, homosexuality is a particularly vivid example of our rejection of God. The glory of God and the complementarity of the sexes are evident in nature. Similarly, when our idolatry distorts our relationship with our Creator, our orientation towards other humans suffers as a result. The example of men having sexual relations with other men, and women with women reaffirms this axiom of creation.

Fourth, unrestrained sin, including homosexuality, is an evidence of God's wrath in passive form. The non-interference of God in our lives is not a tacit endorsement of God's permission. Just the opposite, it is a way in which God brings judgment on an individual.

Fifth, the approval of sin exacerbates the guilt of sin. Endorsement is the end of the line. Here, illicit passions are not just expressed but celebrated and defended. Nothing could be sadder for the image-bearer than to embrace their brokenness as beauty, and their rebellion as righteousness. And yet, this is happening around us today.

Though advocated and legislated in an increasing number of states, the proposal for "same-sex marriage" does not honor these couples but institutionalizes human shame. It is a modern-day fig leaf that Christians must reject since it dishonors both God and human beings.

Still in our boldness to call sin "sin," we must be equally bold to proclaim forgiveness, grace, and love. And not surprisingly, in each of the passages we've surveyed, there is an explicit invitation for sinners to find mercy at the altar of grace.

Redemption: Good News for Sexual Sinners

In his plan of redemption, God tells us how the sexually immoral can be redeemed. Lest we think that God's only word on homosexuality is judgment, let's read around in the immediate context of each of the verses we've explored.

There is good news of substitution in the book of Leviticus

Remember God's judgment that men sleeping with men is an abomination? That command comes in the context of the book of Leviticus, a book whose very shape and substance highlights the marvelous initiative of God to make a way for sinful people to meet with him. Through a comprehensive system of sacrifice and priestly representation God's people could find a way of pardon and cleansing. And yet the entire system points forward to a greater priest who would solve the problem of sin once and for all by the sacrifice of himself (Heb 9:13–14; 10:14). The "point" of Leviticus is to lead guilty, defiled, *repentant* sinners to find redemption and cleansing in Christ (cf. 1 John 1:9).

There is good news of cleansing in 1 Corinthians 6:11

Remember Paul's clear words that those who practice homosexuality will not enter the kingdom? He followed that warning with this gracious proclamation: "And such *were* some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Our various temptations may never leave us, but a sinners' hope is that in the gospel God ultimately takes away sin. The Christian has undergone a fundamental change so that they are a new person with a new standing before God and a new future.

There is good news of salvation in Romans 3:24–25

Remember how God's righteous wrath is revealed against the unrighteous who suppress the truth about him? Here's where Paul was headed. In Romans 3:24–25, after bringing all men under the judgment of God's wrath, Paul writes,

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Honestly, the power of the gospel is that it levels all sinners at the cross and it raises those who believe to new life by means of justification, redemption, and propitiation. While the good news won't condone our sexual proclivities, it will crucify them and give us a new power to put to death the deeds of the flesh (Rom 1:16–17; 8:13).

The good news of the gospel is a message of a love beyond compare

Without Christ, we have no hope; but in Christ we have great hope. Because of God's gospel, repentant sinners can honestly admit their wickedness before God, while simultaneously reveling in God's loving forgiveness. There is no contradiction. And there is therefore no contradiction for us to speak about the sin of homosexuality and to do so with love. We speak about sin in order that sinners might know washing, sanctification, and justification through Christ.

This was the promise first made in Genesis 3:15 after Adam and Eve sinned. And it is the invitation that God gives until the last chapter of Revelation (22:17): "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come." While we began with Genesis, let us now conclude by a consideration of the new creation and a world better than sex.

New Creation: A World Better Than Sex

In his promise of a new creation, God tells us about a world better than sex. Listen to this description of the future world of love.

Revelation 21:1–9

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ...And I saw the holy city ...prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. ...He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore ... [And he said] "Behold, I am making all things new. ...To the thirsty I will

give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ...But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." Then came one of the seven angels...saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."

What does Revelation 21 teach us?

First, it teaches us that heaven unifies us with God.

The union we were made to enjoy with a spouse in this life is but a flicker of what the believer will enjoy with God. Marriage is a picture of that union, a parable of the infinite bliss of marriage with God. He is our Bridegroom; the church is his bride (cf. Eph 5:31–32).

Second, heaven is filled with only good things. God wipes away our tears. All pain is gone. In heaven illicit desires are erased and sexual sin is stopped. While this world is filled with sexual confusion, the world to come is crystal clear. Accordingly, it is worth looking into the future to better understand God's will about sexuality in the present.

Third, heaven will be utterly satisfying. In the city of God there is river of delights (cf. Ps 36:8), a spring of living water. Its cost is free; its worth is priceless. For the sexually unsatisfied in this age, the holy city will more than make up for all the feelings of loss now. But it is a "holy city," and one whose inhabitants are clothed in the righteous garments of a purified virgin (Rev 19:7–8).

Fourth and finally, there is a direction and goal to history. The right side of history is a side with an eternal, monogamous, complementary union between Christ the groom and his bride, the church. Same-sex marriage is an unreality that does not cohere with the Bible or the final goal of creation—the marriage supper of the Lamb.

This is the story of the Bible. And this is the context and ground of our sexual ethic. It's not just biblical. It's beautiful. And while more questions need to be answered, we cannot escape the fact that from the beginning of the Bible until the end there is a unified story about marriage, from Adam and

Eve to Christ and his church. And, thus, the story of Scripture reveals the voice of God on homosexuality because it reveals the voice of God on marriage, gender, human sexuality.

Homosexuality, Human Dignity, and the Gospel

In the end, how should we respond to those who resonate with Matthew Vines? In the first place, we must remember who we are. Paul didn't struggle with same-sex attraction, and yet he could say, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim 1:15). We must let our sin temper our speech.

But we must also remember what we have—the purifying power of God's gracious gospel. We have a Word from God about sin, and we have a Word from God about salvation. Accordingly, we must not be ashamed of the gospel and we must boldly defend its unified message even as we engaged a fractured world.

Here's what that might sound like in response to Matthew Vines, or anyone else struggling with same-sex attraction:

You are not alone and you are not uniquely unworthy of love. In Adam, we are all sinners by birth (Rom 5:12, 18–19). But, as Scripture says, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

Jesus Christ took our condemnation so that we might be forgiven and live without guilt. And he took our rejection so that we might never be alone. So, my friend, I urge you to exchange the lie that your desires define you for the truth that God defines us all. Turn from sin, trust the cross, and know total forgiveness and true family. Nothing is more humanly dignifying than this.

ENDNOTES

¹Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014).

²"The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality," by Matthew Vines. Accessed on April 2, 2014. <http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript>

³This article is an adaptation of a three part lecture given on April 5,

2014 at Desert Springs Church, entitled, *Homosexual Marriage: Seeking Clarity, Conviction, and Compassion*. http://www.desertspringschurch.org/messages/By_Series/Seminar-Homosexual_Marriage/.

⁴Samuel Emadi makes this point in his review of Jason Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from Gays-vs.-Christian Debate*, in *JBMW* 18.2 (Fall 2013): 38–39.

⁵For help in answering objections to the traditional interpretation of Scripture on this issue, I have found extensive help from the fine work of Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

⁶Cf. Denny Burk who lists seven: marriage is (1) covenantal, (2) sexual, (3) procreative, (4) heterosexual, (5) monogamous, (6) non-incestuous, and (7) symbolic of Christ and the church (*What is the Meaning of Sex?* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013], 87–109).

⁷On the subject of inter-sex and how people who suffer from gender disorders (e.g., Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia, Klinefelter's, etc.) do not disprove this gender essentialism, see Denny Burk, *What is the Meaning of Sex?*, 20–21, 77–78, 169–76, 180–82.

⁸Christopher Ash, *Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2007), 29–45.

⁹On the centrality of pursuing children in marriage, see David Schrock, "Children: A Blessed Necessity for Christian Marriages," in *The Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 4.1 (Fall/Winter 2013): 62–64.

¹⁰In only seven generations, we see recorded in the biblical text a prominent deviation from God's design for marriage: Lamech married two women and boasted of his ungodly exploits (Gen 4:23–24).

¹¹Interestingly, laws about sexuality are not infralapsarian. When God created Adam and Eve, he commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Hence, from the inception of mankind, there were divine imperatives regarding human sexuality.

¹²See Tom Schreiner, "Leviticus," in *The King and His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 56–61.