

Dear Marty,

Thank you for your email. It's always great to hear from a former student, especially one as bright and conscientious as you.

Thanks for catching me up on your life. When you said in your email that you're gay, I wasn't quite sure what you meant. Some use that expression to refer to same sex attraction. Still, others use the expression, "I'm gay," to describe homosexual orientation, an attraction to the same sex that's strong and durable and pervasive.

For others, "I'm gay" refers to a gay identity. It's more a statement about how they see themselves and how they want others to see them. I'd love to hear more about what you mean when you say you're gay. This kind of clarity would be really helpful.

Your email asked me what the Bible says about being gay. Marty, I apologize that I never made time to talk about this very clearly in class. It is a sensitive issue, but it's too important to leave unmentioned. Thanks for asking.

I agree with you completely that the place to start when you try to answer this question is NOT Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. You're absolutely right that this has nothing to do with monogamous, committed homosexual behavior, homosexual orientation or same sex attraction. Genesis 19 refers to homosexual gang rape. It describes an extreme example of inhospitality. Since we're trying to find out how God views the gay lifestyle, this passage has little to say to us.

Another place NOT to begin is Leviticus 18:22. One of my friends refers to Leviticus 18 as a chapter about how not to have sex. There's no question that Leviticus 18:22 clearly condemns homosexual sex: "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman. That is detestable."

The problem is not what it says, but in knowing what it says to us. It is inconsistent to choose some passages from Leviticus and not others. It's not fair to choose Leviticus 18:22 which condemns homosexual sex but ignore Leviticus 19:19, just one chapter later, which prohibits wearing fabric made of two different kinds of cloth. Both are forbidden in Leviticus. How can we consider one and not the other morally binding?

It's better to take our direction from three passages that we find in the New Testament: Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:9-11. I'll cut and paste them into this email just to make it easier for you to follow me. First, Romans 1:18-32:

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but

their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-- who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips,³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents;³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (NIV)

Clearly, Paul's primary goal here is not to condemn homosexuality but to use this and other activities he identifies as sinful to show that both Gentiles and Jews have fallen short of God's glory. At the same time, in this description of fallen humanity, we find a strong condemnation of same-sex sex. In verse 26, he refers to lesbian sex as shameful lusts. In verse 27, he refers to male homosexual sex as having abandoned natural relations with women, as being inflamed with lust, and as shameful acts. It's clear that Paul is opposed to homosexual sex.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 concludes similarly:

"Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. 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.

That phrase in verse 9, "men who have sex with men," actually describes both participants in same sex intercourse. It includes a reference to male prostitutes, passive partners in homosexual acts. It also refers to the active partner, or "men who practice homosexuality" (ESV). This translates the word "arsenokoitai," used here for the first time in the New Testament. In fact, some contend that Paul may have coined this term, perhaps thinking of Leviticus 18:22.

Then there's 1 Timothy 1:9-11. Here, Paul writes:

"We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers, and for whatever else is contrary to the sound

doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me."

The phrase, "those practicing homosexuality" translates the same term found in 1 Corinthians 6:9, but in the plural, "arsenokoitais." As with Romans 1, it's one in a catalogue of sinful behaviors including the sexually immoral, slave traders, liars and perjurers. As with the first two passages, it's pretty clear what God thinks about same-sex sex.

Of course, there are some who support the gay lifestyle regardless of what the Bible says. It doesn't matter to them that the Bible is opposed to it. The question you're asking is how someone who believes that the Bible still speaks with authority about morality can argue that homosexuality is acceptable. How can they read these passages and still conclude that the Bible is favorable toward monogamous same-sex sex?

I think they would say that what I have shared above, the traditional interpretation, misreads Scripture in three ways. First, it fails to see the big picture. Second, it fails to read these passages in their historical context. And third, it misreads Scripture by failing to understand that God is still speaking.

"You fail to see the big picture," they say to those of us who take the traditional view, "because you focus on proof texts. You miss the forest for the trees. You draw one verse out of context and set your doctrine on that one verse." It reminds me of when I was a kid. One of my friends was a young man with long hair. A lady in our church passed him a note that said, "It is a sin for a man to have long hair." He turned it over and wrote on the other side, "Women should keep silent in the church," and handed it back.

We think we've proven our point because we can find a verse that supports it. We focus on Romans 1:26-27 as if Paul was only talking about homosexuality, when actually the big picture is describing how ALL have sinned. How ironic that in a passage which describes how all have sinned, we focus on a particular sin to the exclusion of everything else. We're told we are missing the forest for the trees.

Instead, we should ask big picture questions. For example, what would Jesus do? Not once in the gospels do we find Jesus condemning homosexual behavior. He would have known about it since it was not uncommon in his day. Instead, he welcomed outcasts like the woman caught in adultery.

We're told we should ask big picture questions like what action best expresses love for God and neighbor. It's unloving to treat people who have not chosen to be attracted to those of the same sex as if it was a choice, and just tell them to stop.

We should be asking big picture questions like "What does God think about this?" God is love and would love those whom He created to be the way they are.

Marty, I agree that the big picture matters and we shouldn't base our ethics on a proof text. At the same time, we ought not ignore texts in order to see the big picture. After all, while it is

wrong to miss the forest for the trees, there is no forest if there aren't trees.

We've got to look at the texts and when we do, we find them all consistently opposing homosexual sex. Even when you look at the big picture, you don't find any reason to come to a different conclusion. What would Jesus do? What did Jesus say to the woman caught in adultery? "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

What action best expresses love for God and neighbor? If the Apostle Paul is right that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9), then the most loving thing to do is to speak up for righteousness.

What does God think about all this? He loves all people even while they're still sinners. He strongly and consistently condemns homosexual behavior, but He forgives sins and He enables people to live by His ways even if it goes against their orientation. Marty, even when we look at the big picture, it seems to me we come to the same conclusion.

Second, we are told we have failed to read the passage according to its historical context. Remember the passage, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." Paul commands it several times, and yet we don't do that. Everyone agrees that some commands were meant for that time while some commands were meant for all times.

Some believe that Paul's commands regarding homosexual behavior were clearly meant for that time, but not ours. Paul was prohibiting a specific type of homosexual behavior, they say, specifically pederasty. These were homosexual acts committed by an adult with a young man or boy. Or Paul was describing homosexual behavior associated with idolatry. He was not speaking about monogamous, homosexual behavior.

Those who argue this way, however, have little evidence upon which to base their assumptions. Paul does not limit his comments to a certain type of homosexual behavior, but speaks of it generally. He does not focus on one partner in the homosexual act, but on both. The burden of proof seems to rest on those who want to put a more specific interpretation on Paul's language.

A test to determine whether a command is for that time or for all time is "What does the rest of Scripture say on this subject?" Here the answer is clear. There's no softening of the view. God's Word is consistently negative regarding homosexual behavior. Much has changed, Marty, and some of what we find in the Bible is culturally conditioned, but not, I think, God's comments about homosexual behavior.

The third so-called failure of the traditional view is the failure to understand that God is still speaking. You may have heard me quote the Puritan, John Robinson, "God has yet more light to break forth from His Holy Word." I do agree that God is still speaking. He's not adding to the Bible, but He is helping the Church through the Spirit understand the implications of what He originally inspired. God is still speaking. He still has more light yet to break forth from His Holy Word. This is why we're not bound to the ethic of Leviticus 18 or 19. God was still speaking,

helping His people understand that the Old Testament ethic was no longer binding.

God is still speaking. This is why we believe in the Trinity. That term is never used in the New Testament, but God was still speaking, helping His church to understand how God could be three yet one. This is why we don't practice slavery. It's clearly permitted in the Bible and yet there are clues that God would lead His church to understand slavery as illegitimate. To take one such passage, Galatians 3:28 asserts that in Christ there is neither slave nor free. The Church now agrees that God condemns slavery in all forms, in spite of what the other passages in the Old and New Testament say. God was still speaking.

You know how I feel about the right of women to preach. Paul prohibits it in at least some of his churches, but there are other passages which seem to suggest a permission, or at least a trajectory that will move toward full rights for women to preach. Again, we can look to Galatians 3:28 which claims that in Christ there is neither male nor female. God is still speaking, and many of us believe He is saying that women preachers are now acceptable, even though one can find proof texts in the New Testament to the contrary.

One of the ways we understand that God is still speaking is to look to science, to the "Book of Nature" as Wesley sometimes called it. These two sources of truth, properly understood, will never contradict one another. In the past, astronomy helped us better understand those passages in the Old Testament which spoke of the sun standing still and the earth being the center of the universe.

God is still speaking. He is helping us to understand His Word more clearly; not new books, but new understanding from the old books. In fact, according to Matthew 16:19, God intends the Spirit to guide the Church to "bind and loose," that is, to understand Scripture more clearly.

The fundamental question, Marty, is this: Does a full inclusion of gay persons represent the movement of God's Spirit, parallel to the full inclusion of women, or does it represent a movement away from faithfulness to Scripture and tradition? God is still speaking, but is He saying something different about this issue?

I don't think so. For one thing, I find no contrary testimony in the Bible. Unlike slavery and women's rights, there is no softening or evidence of a trajectory toward change in God's mind. Nor do I find evidence in Church history of a softening of position.

I don't believe that science has spoken definitively on this subject, as in confirming a genetic cause for same-sex attraction. Even if it did, this would be different from the discovery of a natural law. Even if science proved a genetic predisposition to a certain behavior, that fact alone does not make that behavior moral.

Furthermore, it seems to me, Marty, that the motivation to change this view arises neither from a clearer understanding of the Bible or scientific evidence, but from feelings, inclinations, and experiences. While these are helpful sources of knowledge, this type of evidence is not a good basis for a change of this magnitude, given that we live in a fallen world. Marty, I have to conclude that the Bible doesn't approve of homosexual behavior.

I've answered your question as best I know how. Now, if you will let me, please let me offer a few pieces of advice.

First, please remember that orientation is not destination. Being attracted to the same sex is a temptation, not a sin. It becomes one only when you assume you must yield to your inclinations. I want you to get a copy of *Homosexuality and the Christian* by Mark Yarhouse. In that book, Yarhouse talks about a gay script. The gay community, in seeking to help people navigate these challenging same-sex attraction waters, speaks of the importance of discovery. They say that what you need to do is discover who you truly are—your true self—and then with integrity, own it and act on it.

There is also a Christian script. I imagine you've heard one so-called Christian script: "Stop it. Don't do that." There is another, truly Christian script. I recommend it. It doesn't emphasize discovery, but integration. The Christian script says, "Recognize this aspect about yourself. If this is how you see yourself attracted or even oriented, recognize and acknowledge that.

You might even take consolation in knowing that all of us, not just those attracted to others of the same sex, but all of us are born oriented in unhelpful ways. Some of these have to do with sexuality, but there are lots of other mis-orientations.

All of us are born with an orientation to sin. This is what we mean by original sin. It comes naturally, but it isn't natural. It's one effect of the fall of humanity. Your same sex attraction is one of many feelings that humans have that are not as they were intended to be. Remember, Marty, our predispositions aren't natural. They're unnatural. Natural is the Garden of Eden. Unnatural is everything since then because sin has corrupted nature, including our nature.

I think everyone would admit that having a predisposition doesn't excuse behavior. We know we can't do what we want, just because we feel like it. We all know certain feelings must be disciplined. If I'm naturally drawn to view pornography, that is no excuse to do so. In fact, that's a good reason to avoid it.

Remember, Marty, predispositions are never permanent. We serve a God who is capable of transforming our lives, of reorienting us. I'm not pushing an easy solution here. God does not always take away a person's same sex attraction. If He doesn't, however, He can be counted upon to give grace to live according to His ways.

The Christian script tells you to recognize this aspect about yourself, but then remember your sexuality is not the defining element of your identity. The most important thing about you is that you are made in God's image. Integrate your sexuality into your true identity, rather than exchanging your true identity for your sexuality. If it is any consolation, this is the responsibility of every person in our hyper-sexualized culture, not just those who are gay.

My second bit of unsolicited advice is this: beware of who you worship. I'm grateful to those in the gay community who have pointed out to me what I had missed, that in at least one of those passages, there is an underlying warning against idolatry. Every one of us has to choose between ourselves and God, and this includes what we do with our sexuality. For you, for me, for everyone, whether heterosexual or homosexual, making our sexual expression the most important thing in our lives, that which must be honored, is idolatry.

I love this quote from Jenell Williams Paris:

When desire is seen as the sun around which identity orbits, both become rigid and unassailable; to question desire is to question a person's selfhood and worth. However, when desire is seen as a shifting planet that moves around the stable sun of belovedness, one's identity as a child of God can remain in place regardless of how desire changes or doesn't change. When desire is respected as a site of conflict and a venue for grace, it remains responsive to discernment and care, though this may or may not mean that desire will respond to attempts to change it.

You are not your own, Marty. You've been bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body.

My third bit of advice: remain in the Church. Become part of a church that is committed to you discovering your true identity. Become a part of a church that continues to speak the truth to you, that you are not your sexuality, that your principle identity is one made in the image of God. Find a church like that and stick with it.

Commit yourself to a church that helps you integrate your orientation with your beliefs and values, one that takes on the responsibility to journey with you. Commit yourself to a church that helps you see your desires as shifting, but your identity as firm. Commit yourself to a church that commits themselves to you for the long and possibly, difficult road ahead.

I'm sorry, but the Church may be slower coming along than you would like. Try to be patient with them. They're working hard to find the right balance. They want to be loving. They know they need to be loving. They're just not always sure how. Commit yourself to the Church for the Church is God's sanctifying context. In that context, you can discover who you truly are.

Thank you for your email. Thanks too for the corrective. You've reminded me that we need to look at more than proof texts, but also at the big picture, both the trees and the forest. Thanks for the reminder that we need to be fully aware of the cultural context before we assume we know what the Bible says. Thanks for the reminder that God is still speaking.

Thanks for reminding me of the importance to remain loving. We need to trust others to God and to their own consciences, even when we may not agree with them. Whatever happens, we must always love them.

Marty, you are made to reflect God, not just in your sexuality, but with the entirety of your life. You have been made in His image, and I pray that through integrating all else about you with

this fundamental truth, you will discover who you really are in Christ.

With my prayers,

Steve