



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Things I wish Jesus would have
said about... LGBT persons*

Leviticus 18.22, 20.13, Romans 1.26–27,
Romans 13.8–10

By Pastor Greg Davidson Laszakovits

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777 South Mount Joy Street
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022
717-367-1000
www.ETOWNCOB.ORG

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?! WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT IT?

1

The issue of LGBT persons in society and the church seems to be the defining issue right now in the great US religious and culture wars. One would assume that if Christians are this worked up Jesus must have had some clear statements on the matter. Yet we have no record of Jesus saying anything about homosexuality. He talked a lot about money, the kingdom of God, the value of all people, and even sex. Today we delve into what the Bible does and does not say on the matter and what it means to us as people who practice peace, service and openness to all.

As I hope you know by now, we here at Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren are resolutely open and accepting of all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Today, we want to spend some time looking at what the Bible and Jesus say—and don't say—about the matter.

Let's begin with some vocabulary: when we use the acronym *LGBT* we are working to be more accurate and definitive about matters of sexuality and identity. Historically defined as homosexuality, *LGBT* honors the specific needs and concerns of many more persons. *LGBT* is short for *lesbian* (a woman attracted to other women), *gay* (a man attracted to other men), *bisexual* (a man or woman who is attracted to women and men), *transgender* (those who do not identify with their biological gender). Often a *QIA* is added to the end. *Q* for *questioning* (those exploring their sexual orientation and/or identity), *I* for *intersex* (a person whose sexual anatomy or chromosomes do not fit with traditional markers of female and male—1 in 1500–2000 people are born with both female and male anatomy or XXY chromosomes), and *A* for *asexual* (a person who does not feel sexual attraction or a desire for partnering).

2 It is fair and important to note that language falls short when discussing these matters. There are some people who identify with these various categories but don't like some of the terms. That's okay—who among us likes to be boxed in and defined. I intentionally chose to place the word “persons” in the heading today. If we use the term persons to refer to individuals rather than a massive, unspecified group, then this is the perfect time to use the term persons. We're talking about individuals—each child of God precious in God's sight.

I also want to note that while I am going to be honest with scripture, I'm not going to present this in a neutral manner. In my 20-some years of Biblical study and pastoral experience in a couple of different cultures, along with life experience and what I consider the movement of the Holy Spirit, as one would expect, I have formed beliefs. Simply put, my belief is this: as a follower of Jesus who preached and embodied love above all else, I believe there should be total inclusion of LGBT individuals into society and the church.

I know there are others who in good faith see this differently than I do. Many flat out disagree with me Biblically. Another group of you wants to be inclusive of everyone, but you struggle with what you have been taught. If you are not at the same place as me, that's okay. I would love to talk more in a spirit of mutual respect and dialogue. I know that our minds and hearts are not usually moved by someone else's logic, position, or apologetics, Biblical or otherwise. As pastors, we see that opinions about these issues are most often formed through experiences with people they love.

Now, with all of that important vocabulary and groundwork in place, let's start with what the Bible does say about the matter. Even though Jesus did not talk about it, other writers did.

BIBLICAL SCRIPTURES THAT SEEM TO BE ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY, BUT AREN'T¹

Homosexuality is mentioned in only six or seven of the Bible's 31,173 verses. The reason it is difficult to even put an exact number on the number of times it is mentioned is because some of the times it is mentioned, the point of the scripture is not homosexuality, but something else. For example, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the comparable story in Judges, which are more about inhospitality and sexual violence than homosexuality itself. As one author put it: to say that Sodom and Gomorrah is about homosexuality is a bit like saying the story of an axe-murderer is about an axe.

Interestingly, Jesus does mention Sodom and Gomorrah in Matthew 10:1–15, and Luke 10:1–12. He declares that certain towns will be more damnable than Sodom and Gomorrah. Why? Because they will be inhospitable to Jesus' disciples: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town." Jesus knew that Sodom and Gomorrah was a tale of judgment about inhospitality. If we still think that Sodom and Gomorrah is a scripture upon which we should blindly model our sexual values, we should also remember this: the protagonist of the story, Lot, mind-bogglingly offered up his daughters for that sexual violence that was threatened. Some scriptures are not what we thought they were.

Also in this category of scriptures that we thought were about homosexuality but aren't: Deuteronomy 23, 1 Corinthians 6.9, and 1 Timothy 1.10. Each mentions sodomy

¹For the next two sections I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Walter Wink for the thoughts contained in his booklet, "Homosexuality and the Bible." http://reconcilingworks.org/images/stories/downloads/resources/003_Homosexuality_and_the_Bible-Wink.pdf

4 but should also be eliminated from this discussion, as it is not clear whether they are about homosexuality or sex-for-hire. They are clearly not about loving relationships.

THREE UNYIELDING DENUNCIATIONS

What we have seen so far, is that of the handful of scriptures that mention—or seem to mention LGBT persons or relationships—we find that many either do not really apply, or apply tangentially at best. That said, there are indeed three scriptures that do clearly condemn homosexuality. Two in Leviticus and one in Romans.

Leviticus 18.22: “*You* (masculine pronoun) shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” Very clear if we read it literally. But there are a few problems if we read this literally. First, the context of this 3,000 year old text. The belief in this pre-scientific era was that semen held *all* the ingredients for procreation and that woman was simply an incubator. So to spill semen, in any way, was viewed as the destruction of life. Also, to spill seed for non-procreative purposes was a threat to the very survival of the Israelites who lived in a hostile environment. They were a minority ethnic group that wanted to grow in population.

The next problem of applying this Levitical Law literally, comes with the second of the three scriptures. This one also in Leviticus, 20.13: “If a male lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination and shall be put to death.” Thankfully, I’ve not heard literalists propose we follow this command. But if one is going to read the Bible literally, can you apply Leviticus 18.22 literally and pretend Leviticus 20.13 doesn’t exist?

A literalist reading of Levitical Law must also reconcile the fact that female homosexual acts are not mentioned at all. Presumably, they are permitted? Moreover, the literalist

would also have to wrestle with the many other Levitical laws about things like mixing fabrics, dietary restrictions, not paying a worker daily, seeding our lawns with two different kinds of grass seed (got a little bit of Kentucky rye in there with tall fescue in that sun/shade mix? Tsk tsk), you get the point. And lastly—and perhaps most disturbingly—a literalist reading allows for some very troubling sexual practices that are not only not condemned, but spoken of matter-of-fact if not admirable manner: polygamy, the keeping of concubines, sex with slaves, treatment of women as property, and older men marrying girls as young as 11 or 12.

And one that Jesus indirectly touched on, levirate marriage. When a married man died with no children, his wife was to have intercourse with his eldest brother. And if that brother died childless, she was passed to the next oldest brother, and so on and so forth. When Jesus was asked which brother this woman would spend eternity, not even Jesus denounced what we would now view as a gross violation of human rights and even rape (Mark 12.18-27). A literal reading would assume Jesus endorses this brutal practice. And oh by the way, literalism also presumes Jesus did not accept divorce. Why are we so stuck on LGBT persons and this one matter of sexuality?

The last of the three scriptures that speaks directly the issue at hand is Romans 1.26-27:

...For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

6 Again, context matters. First of all, Paul likely had no examples of two gay people in a loving, committed relationship. What he did see was a frequent practice for Romans to engage in non-consensual sex between men and their slaves or men and minors. Christian writer John Shore puts it this way,

“This is the societal context in which Paul wrote of homosexual acts, and it is this context that Christians are obliged to bring to their understanding and interpretation.... Paul certainly condemned the same-sex sexual activity he saw around him. It was coercive; it was without constraint; it involved older men and boys. As a moral man, Paul was revolted by these acts—as, certainly, he would have been by the same acts had they been heterosexual in nature.”²

So of course Paul was morally opposed by these non-consensual acts, as we still should be in any act of non-consensual sex, whether homosexual or heterosexual.

I know that was a very fast review about what the Bible says about LGBT persons and homosexuality. Simply put, the Bible leaves us wanting on the matter. Many of the scriptures often referenced do not really speak to the issue or are referring to abusive relationships. The few that do speak to homosexuality are riddled with the problems that come with reading the Bible literally. Namely, that it was a pre-scientific era, with radically different understandings of how the world worked, and would involve picking this one sexual issue while ignoring many, many others. I care about the Bible too much to read it literally. The Bible is the living word of God. The Holy Spirit is at work and God is still speaking.

²John Shore, “The Best Case for the Bible Not Condemning Homosexuality,” https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shore/the-best-case-for-the-bible-not-condemning-homosexuality_b_1396345.html

WHAT DID JESUS SAY?

While Jesus didn't have anything to say about LGBT persons directly, he did have a lot to say about love (big, agape love). About compassion. About those who had been pushed to the margins, like women, children, those with physical or mental illness, tax collectors, the hungry and poor. The Jesus ethic extended the table of love and acceptance to *everyone*. If Jesus walked the earth today, do we really think he would have a seat at the table for everyone except our LGBT sisters and brothers?!

I want to be clear. I am not advocating anything goes, do-whatever-you-please-sexual morality. Our sexuality is a gift from God that is precious and should be used with intention and mutual respect and care and love and fidelity. Just like all other good gifts from God.

THIS CONGREGATION'S HISTORY

I want to close with this congregation's history. I am so proud to be part of this congregation. One of the things that has drawn many is our inclusion of all people, which makes us unique. In broader US Christianity, we are seeing many congregations soften their anti-LGBT rhetoric and some well-known evangelical leaders have even been led to embrace full inclusion of all people, as we do.

The Church of the Brethren is conflicted, but has been rigid, on the matter. A few months ago, all licensed and ordained ministers in our district received a letter that made it clear: any minister performing a same-sex union will be entered into a disciplinary process. We pastors are equally clear: if we are asked to perform a same-sex wedding we will follow the same guidelines we always do when a couple asks us to perform a marriage. Are they deeply in love? Are they committed to spending the rest of their lives with one another? Will they agree to pre-marital counseling sessions? Can we find a date that works for everyone? If the answers

8 to those questions are “Yes,” then by all means, we will officiate those weddings. Through the years, our Executive Committee has supported this approach as a matter of pastoral care and equity. As a congregation that is open to all, we will minister to all. There is no second-class member at the Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren. I love that about us.

But the spirit that I really love about this congregation, the ethos that really sets us apart and makes us strong is our love and our commitment to talk with one another respectfully even if we disagree. All the while listening for how God is still speaking to us. Whether it is this issue, war and peace, politics, or finances, we have made the intentional decision that as a community of Jesus’ love we will not let one issue divide us, even if we don’t see 100% eye to eye.

We’ve hashed through some of the legalistic side of the Bible, even looking at what Paul wrote to the Romans at the beginning of his letter about non-consensual, abusive acts. I want to end with what Paul says a little later about what the law is really all about.

ROMANS 13.8-10

Don’t run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don’t sleep with another person’s spouse, don’t take someone’s life, don’t take what isn’t yours, don’t always be wanting what you don’t have, and any other “don’t” you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can’t go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love.

