

Homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6?

Ekkehardt Mueller

The New Testament contains a number of texts that directly or indirectly address the issue of same-sex sexual behavior, a topic widely and controversially discussed today. Among these New Testament texts, the most important ones are Jesus' discussion of heterosexual marriage in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 as well as Paul's statements in Romans 1:26, 27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10.

The passage in Romans 1 was discussed in the BRI newsletter *Reflections* number 20 of October 2007.¹ It was concluded that homosexuality in Romans 1 is not limited to a certain time, culture, or to certain homosexual forms only. It is sinful behavior. By pointing out that all practices of homosexuality are sin, this passage warns humanity not to get involved in such behavior.

In this essay, we turn to 1 Corinthians 6.

The Biblical Passage

The New American Standard Bible translates 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 in the following way:

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.”

The term “homosexual” is a term used today usually to describe same-sex sexual behavior. Many translators think that two Greek terms in 1 Corinthians 6:9 refer to this behavior. NASB translated them with “effeminate” and “homosexuals.” NKJV chose “homosexuals” for the first term and “sodomites” for the second term, while KJV talks about “effeminate” and “abusers of themselves with mankind.” NAB suggests “boy prostitutes” and “sodomites,” NLT “male prostitutes” and those who “practice homosexuality,” and NRSV “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” The old Darby Bible has “those who make women of themselves” and those “who abuse themselves with men.” Other translations lump both terms together: e.g., ESV reads “men who practice homosexuality,” NIV “men who have sex with men,” and RSV “sexual perverts.” Some of this language is no longer acceptable in modern societies, but at least there seems to be some kind of agreement among Bible translators that 1 Corinthians 6:9 describes homosexual practice.

Suggested Interpretations

Today it is oftentimes claimed that Paul does not refer to monogamous homosexual relationships of mutual respect but condemns pederasty, homosexual prostitution, and exploitive and dehumanizing forms of homosexuality.² If this is true, not all male-male intercourse would be prohibited.³ So we have to take a closer look to understand what Paul had in mind.

The Historical Context

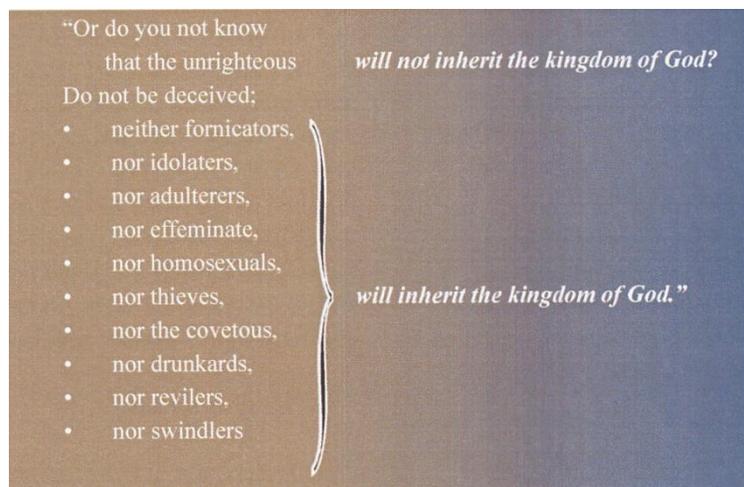
The ancients did not only know what has been called “contingent homosexuals” (people who are not true homosexuals, such as teenagers and adults who are bored with heterosexuality and get involved with members of the same sex) and most probably “situational homosexuals” (people who, for lack of heterosexual encounters, resort to homosexual acts) but had also some idea or concept of “constitutional homosexuality” (homosexuality which is said to be permanent and may be part of people's constitution). At least the notion that a person is attracted to the same sex because of his or her constitution is found in Plato's androgynous myth.

Paris states: “Ancient Greek and Roman artifacts and literature show long-term, loving, same-sex sexual relationships between social equals.”⁴

The Literary Context

The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 reaches from chapter 5 to chapter 7, dealing with the issue of human sexuality. In chapter 5 Paul mentions a case of incest in Corinth. Paul accepts as binding the legislation of Leviticus 18, which discusses incest and homosexuality, and urges the Corinthian church to disfellowship the church member involved in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother.⁵ Toward the end of chapter 5 he presents a short list of four different categories of people involved in vices (v. 10), the first one being fornicators. This list is enlarged in the next verse by two additional groups of people. Christians must separate from church members who practice such vices. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 Paul expands the vice lists of chapter 5 to ten groups of people.⁶

The outline of 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 seen on this page indicates that the “unrighteous [who] will not inherit the kingdom of God” are the same as the subsequent ten groups of evildoers neither of whom “will inherit the kingdom of God.” It is possible that the ten groups of verses 9b and 10 can be divided in two major parts, because four of the first five evildoers are committing sexual sins.



The first five groups of people are idolaters and sexual offenders discussed in 1 Corinthians 5–7. In this section, two groups seem to be involved in heterosexual misconduct, while the next two groups refer to people engaged in homosexual misconduct. “Adulterers” applies to married people, while “fornicators” may refer to singles, if the term is not used in its broader sense encompassing all other kind of sexual misbehavior. The rest of chapter 6 warns against a relationship with a prostitute. Like in Romans 1, so also in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul uses a creation text. In 1 Corinthians 6:16 Genesis 2:24 is quoted, rooting the discussion on sexuality in God’s creation and His ideal for marriage and sexual relations. Chapter 7 goes on to describe heterosexual marriage, singleness, and divorce.⁷ In order to avoid *porneia*, “each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband” (1 Cor 7:2). There is no room for homosexuality. If people “do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” Paul is clearly referring to heterosexual marriage.

The Text

1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 as part of this larger context is based on Leviticus 18, the creation account, and Jesus’ exposition of it (Matt 19:3–12; Mark 10:1–12). Although the Corinthian church with its problems pertaining to sexuality is addressed, the issue is broader. The interconnectedness of chapters 5 through 7 as well as its Old

Testament background imply a universal dimension, not limited to time, culture, or certain forms of homosexuality only. The entire passage is prescriptive and not just descriptive. Therefore, Thiselton suggests that 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 is “an even more important and foundational passage than Romans 1⁸ . . .” Practicing homosexuality permanently excludes people from the kingdom of God, as does any of the other vices mentioned by Paul.

The two terms dealing with homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9 are *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.⁹ *Malakoi* has been rendered “effeminate,” “those who make women of themselves,” “boy/male prostitutes,” “(pervert) homosexuals,” and “catamites.” The term normally means “soft” or “luxurious” and appears four times in the New Testament (Matt 11:8—twice; Luke 7:25; 1 Cor 6:9). The two Gospel references depict the same event and describe persons in soft clothes. The meaning of the word must be determined by its context. Jones points to later Christian literature (1 Corinthians 6. Polycarp) where the term describes an unworthy person and could easily have been seen as effeminate.¹⁰ However, he admits: “None of this, of course, negates the possibility that the term *malakos* included male homosexual behavior.”¹¹ Those called *malakoi* are not just soft, mild, or weak men. The majority of interpreters agree that in 1 Corinthians 6:9 this term refers to homosexuals, especially to partners who play the female role in a homosexual relationship.¹² In verse 9 *malakoi* is surrounded by other terms referring to sexual and homosexual behavior, which makes it clear that this word also has a sexual meaning and must be understood as some kind of homosexual behavior.¹³ Gagnon sees this confirmed in extra-biblical literature—for instance, Philo of the first century A.D.¹⁴ However, to restrict the *malakoi* to children and pederasty, as some do, is not only speculative but untenable.¹⁵

The term *arsenokoitai* helps to define the *malakoi*. It is a unique term and in the New Testament found with Paul only.¹⁶ Paul may actually have invented it. It clearly goes back to Levitus 18:22 and 20:13 (LXX). There, the two terms *arsēn* and *koiitē* that Paul has joined together, now forming one term only, are found separately.¹⁷ A literal translation would describe a man lying with a man in bed—having homosexual intercourse. Its meaning is not restricted to pederasty.¹⁸ The *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 may be the active partners in a homosexual relationship.¹⁹

The severe penalty for being a *malakos* or an *arsenokoitēs*, namely exclusion from the kingdom of God, indicates that the two terms refer to adult males who of their own free will—whether by innate orientation or not—have homosexual intercourse with each other.²⁰

Malick notes:

While Paul’s choice of the words ἀρσενοκοῖται and μαλακοί allows for an application to the abuse of pederasty in his day, the words actually denote a broader field of reference including all men who have sexual relations with men. The illogical presuppositions that (a) all sexual relationships are equal before God, (b) Paul’s descriptions are of excessive practices, and (c) homosexuality is a biblically approved expression of sexuality, are necessary prerequisites to the popular conclusion that Paul was discussing only ‘abuses’ in homosexual behavior. The Apostle Paul condemned all homosexual relationships in his vice-list in 1 Corinthians 6:9 as he addressed the need for the Corinthians to judge those within their midst.²¹

Summary and Conclusion

The situation in the New Testament is comparable to that of the Old Testament. The two parts of Scripture agree with each other. The Old Testament contains texts that are clearly dealing with homosexuality; so does the New Testament. Both sets of texts are not limited in scope and time and include all homosexual activity at all times. They spell out that homosexual behavior is a sin that needs to be repented of and forgiven.

Above we have discussed 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 and have concluded that the backgrounds of creation and Leviticus 18 and 20 in 1 Corinthians 6 as well as the study of the text and its vocabulary (v. 9) suggest that in this passage homosexuality includes all forms of homosexual activity and transcends a limited application to the Corinthian church only.²²

It is also important to notice that the Bible is not interested in discussing causes for or different types of homosexual behavior. It focuses on the sexual act itself among people that share the same biological sex and declares such behavior as opposed to the will of God. It does not deal with homosexual attraction as long as the respective person remains celibate, however recognizing that it is possible to sin by dwelling on impure thoughts.²³

In 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul adds the following statement concerning people involved in one or more of the various vices listed before: “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” Paul concludes that some of the Corinthian church members have been involved in these sinful activities, including homosexuality, but they have given up such behavior and live a different life.

Thiselton writes:

On the basis of the distance between the first and twentieth centuries, many ask: ‘Is the situation addressed by the biblical writer genuinely comparable to our own?’ The more closely writers examine Greco-Roman society and the pluralism of ethical traditions, the more the Corinthian situation appears to resonate with our own. . . . What is clear from the connection between 1 Cor 6:9 and Rom 1:26–29 and their Old Testament backgrounds is Paul’s endorsement of the view that idolatry, i.e., placing human autonomy to construct one’s values above covenant commitments to God, leads to a collapse of moral values in a kind of domino effect.”²⁴

While Christians respect all people whether heterosexuals or homosexuals, they attempt to stay away from sin.

Ekkehardt Mueller is Deputy Director of the Biblical Research Institute

¹https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/BRI_newsltr_10-07_%28%2320%29_0.pdf

²Cf. the examples listed by Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 216.

³Cf. James B. De Young, *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in the Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2000), 10, 11.

⁴Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2011), 57, 68. Robert A. J. Gagnon, “The Scriptural Case for a Male-Female Prerequisite for Sexual Relations: The New Testament Perspective,” in *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church: Biblical, Counseling, and Religious Liberty Issues*, edited by Roy E. Gane, Nicholas P. Miller, and H. Peter Swanson (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 113, declares: “A conception of caring, mutually loving homoerotic unions already existed in Paul’s cultural environment and yet even these were rejected by some Greco-Roman moralists.” He develops this statement on the next pages.

⁵Leviticus 18 was accepted as binding even for Gentile Christians by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The legislation in Leviticus 18, though part of the holiness code, also has to do with morality and was binding not only for Israelites but for foreigners.

⁶In all these lists *porneia* is mentioned first.

⁷Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000) 447, 451; Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 84–87.

⁸Thiselton, 447.

⁹They have been hotly debated. E.g., David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes: The Meaning of ARSENOKOITAI (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae*, 38/2 (1984): 125–153, has shown that John Boswell’s claim in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* that *arsenokoitai* means male prostitutes, not male homosexuals, is groundless. William L. Petersen, “Can ARSENOKOITAI Be Translated by ‘Homosexuals’ (I Cor 6:9; I Tim. 1.10),” *Vigiliae Christianae*, 40/2 (1986): 187–191, has responded to Wright. Basically, he holds that the modern concept of homosexuality does not correspond with the one prevalent in antiquity.

¹⁰John R. Jones, “‘In Christ There Is Neither . . .’: Toward the Unity of the Body of Christ,” in *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives*, edited by David Ferguson; Fritz Guy; and David R. Larson (Roseville, CA: Adventist Forum, 2008), part 4–9.

¹¹Jones, part 4–10.

¹²Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 33 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 287, and Ronald M. Springett, *Homosexuality in History and the Scriptures* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference, 1988), 134. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 93, understands *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* as “the passive and active partners in homosexuality.”

¹³William Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 30, mentions that “the word group appears in sexual contexts . . .”

¹⁴Robert A. J. Gagnon, “The Scriptural Case,” 84.

¹⁵Cf. Thiselton, 449.

¹⁶In his book, De Young devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of the term (175–214).

¹⁷Cf. Köstenberger, 216.

¹⁸Gagnon, “The Scriptural Case,” 87, states: “Indeed, there is no evidence in ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, or rabbinic Judaism that any limitation was placed in the prohibition of male-male intercourse.”

¹⁹Cf. Thiselton, 448–450; Via and Gagnon, 83. Springett, 136, suggests: “If Paul was condemning only a crude form of homosexual activity here, by implication allowing other types, he surely would have been more explicit.” Paul comes from a Jewish background, and the Jewish verdict on homosexuality is unequivocal. On the other hand, Jones, part 4–12, acknowledges that *arsenokotai* “almost certainly” has to do with homosexuality, however, “of an exploitive sort.”

²⁰Cf. Via and Gagnon, 82. De Young, 192, states: “Such researchers as Wright and Henry Mendell have definitely shown that *arsenokoitai* must be defined broadly. One cannot limit *arsenokoitai* to pederasty or to active male prostitution. It also includes same-gender orientation, condition, and mutuality.”

²¹David E. Malick, “The Condemnation of Homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 492.

²²Thiselton, 452. In the meantime, polygamy has been legalized in Kenya and in some countries it has been discussed whether or not to repeal incest laws.

²³Cf. Matt 5:27–30.

²⁴One should remember that in Romans 1:26, 27 not only male homosexual activity is mentioned but also female.

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