

Lutherans Read the “Clobber Passages”

By Rev. Tyler Rasmussen

Using the Five Lutheran Lenses

The Plain Meaning of the Text

Scripture is understood in the sense that would seem obvious to their original readers. It respects their context and how they would have heard and experienced the passage.

Note: This isn't the only way to read a text. New Testament interpretations of Old Testament texts often gave them novel meanings, just as African American spirituals gave new meaning to the Exodus stories. However, it is always good to start with the plain meaning before jumping somewhere else, and Luther was particularly critical of those who added many nonsensical interpretations to Scripture.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

Individual scripture passages (some difficult, even contradictory) are interpreted in the light of the whole Bible's central messages and themes. We avoid isolating passages as narrow proof texts. Some scripture is more important than other scripture.

Public Interpretation

Passages should first seek the public meaning of the text – what it would mean to all people. Listening to folks from cultures and generations other than our own ensures that our sense of public is not too narrow. Then we can ask what it means for us—consistent with what it means for everyone.

Law & Gospel

Look for messages throughout the Bible of both law (that which accuses and judges us; commandments) and gospel (that which comforts and saves us; promises). Texts may function as either or both.

What Shows Forth Christ

The whole of the Bible points to Jesus Christ and his saving message to us. Lutherans are Jesus' people, and the Bible is a Jesus book. We worship Jesus, not the Bible.

Resources

Lutheran Lenses

See bookoffaith.org/bof_new/logos/Five_Lutheran_Lenses.pdf for a printout of the above.

See bookoffaith.org/pdf/Some%20Helpful%20Ways%20to%20Read%20the%20Bible-3.pdf for a more complete description of the Lenses.

Or see “Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study”.

Or see pg. 1540-1543 of the Lutheran Study Bible.

Books

“UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality” by Colby Martin

“Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans - On Sexuality and Gender Identity” from ReconcilingWorks

“Gay by God” by Rev. Michael S. Piazza

“Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality” by Jack Rogers

“Transforming” by Austen Hartke (specifically on the 2 trans clobber passages)

Websites

Amy-Jill Levine, Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies
outreach.faith/2022/09/amy-jill-levine-how-to-read-the-bibles-clobber-passages-on-homosexuality/

Rev. Mark Sandlin, Presbyterian pastor and president of ProgressiveChristianity.org
believeoutloud.com/voices/article/clobbering-biblical-gay-bashing/

Rev. Candace Chellew, founder of Whosoever magazine
whosoever.org/clobber-passages-the-bible-and-homosexuality/

Additional Works

Greek and Hebrew concordances

Season 4 of the podcast Revisionist History
pushkin.fm/podcasts/revisionist-history

“The Standard Case”, “Dr. Rock’s Taxonomy”, and “Descend into the Particular”

Episode 141 of the podcast Conversing, with guest Rick Warren
fullerstudio.fuller.edu/podcast/a-life-of-ministry-with-rick-warren/

Episode 308 of the podcast Nomad, with guest Dana Hicks
<https://www.nomadpodcast.co.uk/dana-hicks-reimagining-marriage-n308/>

Various Wikipedia articles

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malakas

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catamite

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binding_and_loosing

Is Arsenokoitai Really that Mysterious?

equip.org/articles/is-arsenokoitai-really-that-mysterious/

The Effeminate and Sodomites

gaymarriageandthebible.com/the-effeminate-in-1-corinthians-6

Has ‘Homosexual’ Always Been in the Bible?

um-insight.net/perspectives/has-%E2%80%9Chomosexual%E2%80%9D-always-been-in-the-bible/

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Genesis 1:27 – Male and Female

**God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.**

The Plain Meaning of the Text

All are made in God’s image. God’s image encompasses all humans, even as they possess diversity and distinction from one another.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Male and Female

Galatians 3:28 – There is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. This text seems to say that our defining character isn’t gender divisions, but our unity in God’s grace.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Eunuchs

Deuteronomy 23:1 – Those who have been castrated cannot enter the Assembly of the Lord (worship space).

Isaiah 56:3-5 – Even though Biblical law excludes those who have been castrated from the Temple (Deuteronomy 23:1), God promises eunuchs, those who have been “cut off”, will not be cut off from God.

Matthew 19:4 / Mark 10:6 – Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27 when discussing marriage and divorce. But just moments later, in **Matthew 19:12**, Jesus acknowledges the existence of eunuchs (some who have been so since birth and some who chose this as part of their faith) without judgment or condemnation. When Jesus reads Genesis, apparently it is not to the exclusion of the existence of people who are neither male nor female as part of God’s created order.

Acts 8:26-39 – The story of the Ethiopian eunuch shows the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

Note: The word “eunuch” in both Hebrew and Greek didn’t always mean someone who had been castrated but could just mean a court official; a good example is Joseph’s owner Potiphar in Genesis. However, Isaiah and Matthew clearly are not using the word to describe court officials; the only other understanding of eunuch in ancient culture was someone with genital deformities or removal.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Parallel Exclusion

Deuteronomy 23:1 – Those who have been castrated cannot enter the Assembly of the Lord (worship space).

Deuteronomy 23:3 – Moabites cannot enter the Assembly of the Lord, even down to the 10th generation of their descendants.

Ruth – Ruth, the Moabite, becomes the great-grandmother of King David.

Public Interpretation

Eunuch is not an ancient stand-in for modern terms like transgender, intersex, genderfluid, or agender. But when reading the Bible as a whole, it is clear Scripture recognizes gender beyond a binary, and that the movement in Scripture is away from exclusion (Deuteronomy) and toward inclusion (Isaiah, Acts).

Some read Genesis 1:27 to define a binary excluding all other possibilities. But as Austen Hartke points out, no one reads the rest of Genesis 1 to mean God did not create sunsets, bacteria, fungi, volcanoes, potatoes, bats, or other galaxies, even though none of them are mentioned. Potatoes, for example, are neither “plants yielding seed of every kind” nor “trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it,” and yet we would read these two descriptors to be inclusive of all plants, even those that don’t fit either description. Based on the plain meaning of other parts of the Creation story, it is more faithful to read “male and female” as the ends of a spectrum or broad descriptors meant to include and cover everyone that is human.

In addition, rabbinic literature (remember, rabbis perform circumcisions and would have first-hand knowledge) has long recognized that not all newborns have clear genitalia. Reading a rule into a descriptor seems wrong, especially when Jesus recognizes people who do not fit the binary.

It is also clear that gender division is not the primary focus of Scripture, but rather unity in Christ. This doesn’t mean that gender doesn’t matter, but that our unity as people made in God’s image and reborn in Christ is priority.

Law and Gospel

There is no word of God’s judgment in this text, but clear words of salvation by naming the presence of God’s image in all people.

What Shows Forth Christ

Regardless of what we think of another human – even if you are someone who understands this passage to define an exclusive binary – we are to look for and expect to find the image of God in others. We are not divided by our genitals or gender expression; we are united in Christ’s redemptive love.

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Genesis 2:24 – Marriage

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

The Plain Meaning of the Text

In context of the creation stories, though God split the first human into two halves, halves that Adam called “man” and “woman”, those halves are still meant to be united.

Scripture Interprets Scripture – God’s Concern

Genesis 2:18 – God’s primary concern is that the human is not alone, and it seems what makes a good partner is an open question in God’s mind, bringing the human many different options.

Note: “Helper” or “Partner” in Genesis 2:18 does not necessarily have any sexual connotations. In the Psalms, God is often called our helper, such as “You are my help and deliverer, O Lord” (Psalm 70:5) or “I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?” (Psalm 121:1). In fact, there is no indication of sexual union between the first two humans until after they leave the Garden.

Note: The NRSV uses “man” instead of “human” in Genesis 2:18. This is a bad translation. Throughout Genesis 2, the word used to describe the human is “a’dam”, a word that means human or person. Only in Genesis 2:23-24 is the word “ish” aka “man” used. The distinction seems important to the author of Genesis.

Scripture Interprets Scripture – Quoting Genesis 2:24

Matthew 19:5-6 / Mark 10:8 – Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 when talking about the importance of marriage and divorce. Christ specifically interprets the text not referring to sex but God’s work in our lives. “What God has joined...” However, the distinction between marriage and sexual union is probably narrow; one could easily use one as a stand-in for the other.

Note: What’s interesting here is that in the Creation stories God is constantly separating. God separates light from dark, sky from sea, one half of human from another. This appears to be the only time God joins things; a unique act in Creation history.

1 Corinthians 6:16 – Paul understands Genesis 2:24 to be about sexual unions. But his primary concern appears to be what illicit sexual unions mean regarding our unity in Christ and our sanctification by the Spirit.

Ephesians 5:31 – On a brief reading, one might think Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in reference to the relationship of husbands and wives (husbands should love their wives as they do their own body; he who loves his wife loves himself), but Paul actually applies new meaning to the text, understanding it to be about our relationship with Christ (we are members of Christ body; this is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church).

Scripture Interprets Scripture – Divinely Established Institutions

Some people call marriage a “divinely established institution” based on Genesis 2:24. Sabbath is also a divinely established institution.

Mark 2:27-28 – The Pharisees noticed Jesus’ disciples doing something unlawful on the Sabbath. They complained to Jesus, and he replied, “The Sabbath was made for humans, not the other way around.” Is the same true about marriage? How does that change how we read Genesis 2:24?

Public Interpretation

Many modern understandings of this text believe it as about marriage and sex, and particularly use as a proof-text for monogamous heterosexual relationships. One valid question about any passage of Scripture is always, “Is this text meant to be proscriptive or descriptive? Is this establishing a rule or describing a reality?”

Note: Minimally Scripture challenges the interpretation that this text could ever be understood as defending monogamy, given the non-judgmental proliferation of polyamory in Biblical relationships (namely, one man with many women).

A queer reading of this text often is humored by the reality described in Genesis 2 versus the claim being made in Genesis 2:24. Compared to the claim, in the story the man “leaves” God and themselves, the former non-gendered whole human, to cling to the woman who is sort of his offspring or genetic clone. The point being, the story of Genesis 2 doesn’t really lead to the claim made in Genesis 2:24.

Law and Gospel

When Scripture quotes Genesis 2:24, its primary concern appears to be how our actions affect our relationships, whether it’s harming other persons we’ve made commitments to or harming the unity God has given us in Christ Jesus.

At the same time, it’s good news that God has an active hand in our relationships. God unites humans in marriage. God unites the Church to Christ in baptism. God creates new life and gives people children. God calls people to ministry. All these things we could explain away as human actions – humans enter marriage covenants. Humans pour water on other humans. Two cells merge to create new life. I chose my profession. But in Scripture, these good things are clearly the work of God. When we enter a good relationship that brings blessings into our lives and the lives of those around us, it is right to say, “God did this!”

What Shows Forth Christ

Paul’s understanding that this text is about our relationship with Christ can be powerful. What does it mean to be united to Jesus? How does that unity change every aspect of our lives? What is it like knowing that the Holy Spirit resides within us? How has Jesus become our partner, the true helper the Psalmist proclaims God to be?

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Genesis 19 – Sodom and Gomorrah

“The men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man” (Gen 19:4)

seek to “know”, that is, have sexual relations, with “the men” (Gen 19:5) – that is, strangers visiting the town.

The Plain Meaning of the Text

There’s a lot going on here. However, a few simple questions may be asked:

- **Who is trying to commit this horrible sin?** Though “the men” is repeated 3 times in the text, “all the people” is a phrase in Scripture that is usually inclusive of everyone in the community, regardless of gender. The emphasis is on everyone in Sodom. Even if it were just the men, we could safely assume most of them are straight.
- **What sin are they trying to commit?** Today, we would call this gang rape. Minimally we can say the sin is trying to commit violence and harm against another, and not of a loving relationship or consensual sex between people of the same gender.
- **Who is being harmed?** The people ask for “the men” to come out, but we have already been told that these are angels (Gen 19:1). Do the people of Sodom know what they are asking?

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Angels and Humans

Genesis 6:4-5 – There is one other time in Scripture that divine beings and humans have sex, and those relationships lead directly to the Flood. “God saw that the wickedness of humans was great.”

“Ra” – the Hebrew word for evil or wickedness – is used to describe the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Ra/Evil, to describe the Nephilim that led to the Flood, and the people of Sodom in both Genesis 13:13 and throughout Genesis 18-19. The sin appears to be a continuation of Adam and Eve’s first sin, where they tried to be like God and, as a result, turned good into evil by calling evil good.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Parallel Story

Judges 19-21 repeats the scene in Sodom with one key difference – the person who is ultimately gang raped and killed is a woman, not a man nor an angel. Judges 19-21 is possibly the darkest story in all of Scripture, but it makes clear the rape that the people of Sodom were trying to commit was not from “homosexual desire” but to dehumanize and oppress outsiders, an anti-hospitality practice. The people in Judges didn’t care who they raped; they just wanted to harm these foreigners.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Descriptions of Sodom

Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned as examples in 15 books of the Bible! Some books make claims about what Sodom did, either directly stating their sin or by saying that the current sin is like Sodom’s. Many of these passages use Sodom to say what is happening now is WORSE than Sodom’s sin.

Directly Stating Sodom’s Sin

- **Ezekiel 16:48-49** – Sodom’s sin was “pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”
- **Jude 1:6-7** – Sodom’s sin was “indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust.”

Indirectly Stating Sodom's Sin

- **Isaiah 3** – Israel's sin is like Sodom, because "the people were oppressed, everyone by another" and "they proclaim their sin and do not hide it" and they "grind the face of the poor".
- **Jeremiah 23:14** – The prophets of Israel are like Sodom, because they "commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness."

Isaiah and Ezekiel agree that oppression and the treatment of the poor are the primary issues at hand. The issue is how we treat others. Jeremiah and Jude identify adultery, sexual immorality, and unnatural lust. Do these words condemn "homosexual desire"? A look at the Leviticus and Romans clobber passages may help.

Public Interpretation

Most people agree this story isn't about homosexuality; it's about rape. Modern examples of rape, especially gang rape, show that such acts are often not about sexual desire but about dominating, dehumanizing, and expressing hate. There are numerous examples of straight people raping members of the LGBTQIA+ community for exactly these reasons. There's no indication that anyone in Sodom was homosexual, and the parallel story in Judges clearly shows those people – who first tried to gang rape a man before raping the woman to death – were in fact straight, because at the end of the story the remaining members of the tribe abduct young women from a neighboring village to be their wives.

Law and Gospel

This text has clear judgment from God, with Sodom and Gomorrah being wiped off the face of the earth. But the judgment began before this story. Already in the previous chapter, the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!" (Genesis 18:20).

This text has Gospel in the form of Abraham, who continually pleads with God to save Sodom – even if most people in the city are wicked – for the sake of a few righteous. God agrees that the righteousness of a few would be worth saving the whole city. It is good news that the righteousness of a few can save a whole city! Scripture says the righteousness of one (Jesus) will make many righteous (Romans 5:19).

This text also has Gospel in the form of Lot. Lot follows the laws of hospitality and shows kindness to the angels, and the angels save Lot and his family, recognizing his acts as righteous.

What Shows Forth Christ

Jesus shows us God's love. He said the Law and Prophets could be summed up with "love God" and "love neighbor". We see such love shown by Lot. What would such hospitality look like today?

We clearly see a reflection of Christ in the intercessions of Abraham in the previous chapter. What would it mean to reflect such love and mercy when we face situations where we'd prefer to judge and condemn? And how beautiful is it that rather than "rapturing away from Earth," Scripture proclaims that a righteousness has the power to save the many!

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Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

The Plain Meaning of the Text

Sex between two men is banned according to Levitical purity codes. Such acts are not simply wrong, but grievously wrong and punishable by death.

The Plain Meaning of the Text: Defining Hebrew Words

There are two words for man in Hebrew. *Ish* is adult man (sometimes, like in English inclusive of men and women). *Zakar* is men of all age, and often used to describe men who are not yet adults (aka boys). In these texts, it says “If an *ish* lies with a *zakar* as with an *ishah*...”

Martin Luther, in his German translation of the Bible, uses the German word *knaben* or boy for *zakar*. In English, Luther’s translation says, “Man shall not lie with young boys as he does with a woman, for it is an abomination.” The King James Version varies on its translation of this word, but often uses the phrase “man child” in place of *zakar*. That would make the plain meaning of this text to say, “Raping children is wrong.”

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Sex

There are many Scripture passages about sex. A few clear patterns among all of them are as follows:

- A major concern is procreation. All non-procreative sex, including masturbation, is condemned.
- A major concern is patriarchal codes. Inheritance (determining fathership of a child), ownership (all women are property), and maintaining social order (if a man lies with a man, who owns whom?) are issues whenever sex is addressed. Justice and inbreeding are also included.
- Women are never explicitly forbidden from having sex with other women. Lesbian relationships are never addressed in Scripture (see Romans 1:25-28 below for the one place some claim otherwise).

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Abomination

Leviticus 20:25 – Eating unclean animals is also considered an abomination, yet based on Acts 10 most Christians eat unclean animals today.

Proverbs and the Prophets – Lying lips, arrogance, unjust scales, the prayers of law breakers, and the incense and sacrifices of those who do not do justice are all considered abominations.

Luke 16:13-15 – The one time Jesus uses the word “abomination”, he refers to greed and love of money.

Scripture Interprets Scriptures, Jesus on Leviticus

Jesus quotes or references Leviticus seven times in the Gospels, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. (*Leviticus is referenced a few other times in the Gospels by the narrators or other voices*)

- Matthew 5:33 => Leviticus 19:12
- Matthew 5:38 => Leviticus 24:20

- Matthew 5:43, 19:19, 22:39, Mark 12:31, and Luke 10:27 => Leviticus 19:18
- Matthew 12:5-8 => Leviticus 24:5-9
- Matthew 15:4, Mark 7:10 => Leviticus 20:9
- Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42 => Leviticus 27:30
- John 8:51-52 => Leviticus 18:5

However maybe the greatest example of how Jesus understands Levitical purity code is John 8:1-11, the story of the woman caught in adultery. The scribes and Pharisees quote Leviticus 20:10 to justify stoning her to death. But Jesus challenges, “Let the one without sin throw the first stone.” When they all leave, Jesus tells the woman, “I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” Faced with a clear violation of Levitical purity codes, Jesus saved the life of this woman and showed her mercy, letting the Law judge all those who desired to do evil toward her.

Public Interpretation

Most Levitical purity codes are taken with a grain of salt by Christians today, and many are outright ignored (sometimes with support from New Testament readings; sometimes without); none are punished by death. The role of texts from Leviticus in Christianity is a large discussion, but one question anyone could ask is, “Why should these passages be enforced as binding on Christians when most of the rest of Leviticus is not?”

Law and Gospel

The Law is, according to Paul “what kills”, but the Gospel “gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). This is a time when it is appropriate to look beyond the words of Scripture and consider the actual lived reality today. Abundant evidence shows that those who deny their sexual orientation or receive conversion therapy experience bad outcomes, “death” in its broadest sense. Those who accept their gender expression and are embraced by their community experience good outcomes, “abundant life”. Unlike other things considered vices, where life is found when such things are ended and continuing in those vices ultimately lead to self-destruction, the opposite is true for the experience of sexual orientation and gender identity.

One must seriously ask, “If evidence clearly shows that the path to positive outcomes is embracing one’s orientation and identity and supporting others for doing the same, and major negative outcomes occur when such things are denied or condemned, then how can God possibly desire the harm over the good?” The answer is God doesn’t. If there is a path that leads to depression, suicide, hate crimes, rape, and death and another path that leads to abundant life – not just for one (like greed, in which one benefits at the harm of another), but for the whole community, we can be certain Jesus calls us to follow the path of abundant life.

What Shows Forth Christ

Jesus’ showed us God’s love, and said the Law and Prophets could be summed up with “love God” and “love neighbor”. In fact, 1 John 4 claims “God is love” and “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”. We know today that LGBTQIA+ relationships can be full of love.

Jesus also says that he came not to condemn the world (John 3:17) but so that we may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Simple empirical evidence shows that when we and our community embrace our sexual orientation and gender expression, it leads to abundant life; when we or our community deny our identities, it leads to harmful outcomes and death.

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Romans 1:25-28

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.

The Plain Meaning of the Text

Nonprocreative sex of any kind is unnatural and wrong.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Romans

Romans 1:16-2:16 – When read in context, it is clear Paul is writing to two groups (Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians) who are in conflict. And the Jewish-Christians clearly think they have the upper hand in the argument. If you were a Jewish-Christian in Rome, you would hear the words of Romans 1:16-32, and by the end you’d be cheering. “You tell them, Paul! Tell them how wrong they are!” And then you’d get to Romans 2:1 and hear “Therefore”, and you’d think, “Yes! This is it! Kick them out of the Church. Pronounce judgment on these evil people!” But then Paul pulls the rug out from under you, and you fall flat on your face as he points all the fingers directly at you. “For you are doing the very same things.” No one is innocent in this story, and so we all depend on the grace of God in Christ Jesus. The rest of Romans is an elaboration on this point. Those who use this text to point the finger and accuse others do well to continue reading Romans and recognize that same finger pointing directly at them, as well as God’s grace pointing at everyone.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Binding and Loosing

Matthew 16:19 / Matthew 18:18 – Jesus gave his disciples the power of the keys, to bind or to loose. This means his disciples had the authority to determine the laws people would be bound to and those they would be loosed from, which laws applied in which circumstances, and which ones didn’t in other circumstances.

Acts 15:28-29 – In Scripture, we find debates about which rules apply to all Christians across cultures and which ones can be set aside (what should be “bound” or “loosed”). At the First Jerusalem Council, they loose the Gentile Christians from all Jewish Christian rules (including circumcision!) except three: abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood and what is strangled, and from fornication. Interestingly, we find that even these requirements are debated, as Paul writes about a conflict over food sacrificed to idols in his letters (1 Corinthians 8). If the first Christians can be thoughtful about which laws to bind people to and which ones to loose them from, we ought to be as well. We do not simply point and say, “The Bible says so!”

Public Interpretation, Patriarchy

The four oldest commentaries on this passage all agree that the line “their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” is not about women having sex with women, but about women having anal sex with men. The concern isn’t about same gender relations, but about procreative sex. This creates the interesting conundrum that, as much as there are passages in Scripture about male same-gender sexual relationships, there is not a single word in Scripture about female same-gender sexual relationships.

Many historical-critical interpreters see this as a clear sign that the concern is less about sexual relationships per se and more about how to maintain good order in a Patriarchal society. Today we do not live in a Patriarchal society, at least not by historical standards, and even if certain sexual relationships were sinful in a Patriarchal society, it makes sense to question which bans should apply today. Is the issue something that applies across cultures or something that was specifically to the social structures of Patriarchy?

Public Interpretation, Power of the Keys

Regarding the Power of the Keys, in season 4 of the podcast “Revisionist History,” Malcolm Gladwell documents how Jesuits practice this command today, using the philosophy of St. Ignatius. See episodes titles “The Standard Case,” “Dr. Rock’s Taxonomy,” and “Descend into the Particular”. The first episode opens with a real conundrum for the Church in the 16th and 17th centuries: Is insurance premiums usury? Everyone else said, “yes, premiums are usury.” Charging interest is clearly forbidden by Scripture. But the Jesuits said, “No.” For the Jesuits “insurance is a novel problem, and you can’t solve novel problems with old principles. [...] Descend into the particulars. Understand what is distinctive about the case under consideration.” Particularly, they would consider if there were any standard cases that may apply in this situation. One standard case is usury. But the Jesuits said another standard case is the captain of the ship. The captain is guaranteeing the cargo will reach its destination. Insurance is a guarantee that if something happens to a cargo, its value will be covered. Are insurance premiums more like rich people exploiting the poor through usury, or are they more like a captain guaranteeing cargo? The Jesuits argued the latter, and today the Roman Catholic Church does not consider insurance a form of usury.

When confronted with the Romans passage and other clobber texts, many ask similar questions. “Is modern loving relationships between people of the same gender the same as what is being described in Scripture, or is there something distinctive, something novel about these relationships today? Are LGBTQIA+ relationships more like lust and sexual abuse, or are these relationships more like love and marriage?”

Law and Gospel

Paul’s letter to the Romans is full of Law, and within the first three chapters everyone should find themselves saying, “I fall far short of God’s glory.” But it’s full of Gospel as well. Anyone who reads these texts and feels judged ought to keep reading and discover grace abounding in their lives.

What Shows Forth Christ

The letter to the Romans has many great quotes, including:

- “Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4)
- “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-24)
- “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” (Romans 3:28)
- “For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19)

Paul’s point is not to excuse sin, but to turn our hearts to Christ, the one who redeems us, makes us righteous, and empowers us to repent. All of us are convicted by the opening of Romans, but Paul proclaims, “Even in our deepest problems, God’s grace abounds for us.”

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1 Corinthians 6:9-11 & 1 Timothy 1:9-10

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators [*the sexually immoral, NRSVue*], idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites [*men who engage in illicit sex, NRSVue*], thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Timothy 1:9-10 has a similar list, also using the words “fornicators” and “sodomites”.

The Plain Meaning of the Text

This is a list of people/actions Paul considers evil. The first five are sexual in nature. Paul considers these people outside the bounds of God’s grace.

The Plain Meaning of the Text: Defining Greek Words

Malakoi (male prostitutes, NRSV)

This word simply means soft. It is used to describe soft speech (Proverbs 25:15, Proverbs 26:22) and soft clothing (Matthew 11:8, Luke 7:25). In extrabiblical Greek, it could be used as a stand-in for those who live in luxury. Because of its literal meaning as “soft”, many translations use the word “effeminate”. Martin Luther used the German word *weichlinge* or weakling / “sissy”.

In extrabiblical Greek, it’s most common application in a sexual sense was to describe a catamite, or pubescent boy in a sexual relationship with an older man. Often these boys were groomed for these roles, and many served as temple prostitutes. When used in the negative, it described the older men who engaged in such relationships. Today we would call this child sexual abuse.

Wikipedia says *malakoi* is one of the most common slang words in modern Greek, equivalent to wanker or jerk off, and has the meaning of “man who masturbates”. Biblical translations and commentaries from the Reformation through the mid-1900s also understood this word as meaning masturbation, up to the publishing of the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1967. All English translations have abandoned this meaning today.

Arsenokoitai (men who engage in illicit sex, NRSVue)

This word is unique to Paul’s letters; it does not exist in any other Greek writing, biblical or extrabiblical, and has no context to give it a clear meaning. The word is a compound that literally means “man bed”. The oldest English translations say, “abusers of themselves with mankind” (Tyndale; King James). It was first translated as “homosexual” in 1958 in the New Amplified Bible. However, no one knows the meaning for certain.

The best conjecture as to the meaning of this word is that it’s shorthand for Leviticus 20:13. The Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament that is used in most of the New Testament quotes, uses the phrase “*arsenos koiten*”. Most likely, Paul is referencing Leviticus 20:13 (see the section on Leviticus above for more about that passage), though we cannot be certain about this.

Martin Luther, in his translation of this word, used the German word *knabenschander*, or “boy molesters”. He understood *arsenokoitai* to be about child sexual abuse.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Leviticus 20

Of the first 5 words in Paul’s list (the 5 sexual ones), 3 of them explicitly appear in the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 20 (fornicator, adulterer, and men who engage in illicit sex – assuming the compound-word theory is correct). Idolatry is implied (“prostituting themselves to Molech” and “prostituting themselves to mediums and wizards”). Only “male prostitutes” does not appear in Leviticus 20, but in the 1st Century this term was often associated with temple prostitution, a form of sexual idolatry. It is possible Paul is referring to Levitical purity codes throughout this list.

Note: 1 Timothy 1:9-10 only contains “fornicators” and “men who engage in illicit sex”.

Scripture Interprets Scripture, Jesus

Mark 7:20-23 – One time in the Gospels, Jesus has a similar list to Paul’s. The items that are on both lists (using the same Greek words) are sexual immoral, adulterers, thieves, and greedy. He says these things come from within and defile a person.

Of all the words in Paul’s list, greed (literally: to desire more, covetousness) is the one Jesus focuses on the most. The Parable of the Bigger Barns is a warning against such greed (Luke 12:15 uses the same word as Paul). Though Jesus uses a variety of words to describe greed and the love of money, it is said that Jesus talks about money more than any topic other than the kingdom of heaven. Most powerfully, Jesus says, “One cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24). If Paul’s list is going to be used to judge or condemn people, there are many in the Church who would receive judgment for being greedy.

Public Interpretation

Those who read these words to be about homosexual relationships understand *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* to describe bottoms and tops, respectively, in modern gay lingo. *Malakoi* is also associated with effeminate men in general, being used to defend anti-trans hate or disapproval of anyone perceived to be a “poof” or “sissy”.

Rick Warren, on Episode 141 of “Conversing”, a Fuller Seminary podcast, says, “You never build a doctrine on a word that’s used only 1 time in the Bible” (start at 46:10), “otherwise it’s a pretext because there is no context.” As he said, “Scripture interprets Scripture,” and if we have no other Scripture to help us interpret a word, then we do not have enough context to understand its meaning. *Malakoi* is only used in this sense in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; *arsenokoitai* only appears in these two passages, both times as part of a list. The lack of these words in Scripture points to the lack of foundation for applying them as doctrine today.

Law and Gospel

Abusive sexual relationships and any sexual relationship that violates trust or consent are clearly wrong. God calls on us to love one another and not dehumanize each other.

What Shows Forth Christ

Regardless of how one understands this passage, when held beside things such as The Parables of the Lost Things (Luke 15), Jesus’ statement that he came not to condemn but to save (John 3), and the fact that Jesus was known as a friend of sinners, we know Christ sought to love those others reviled. Might we consider these people those who most need our love, who most need grace to abound in their lives?

Lutherans Read the “Clobber Passages”

By Rev. Tyler Rasmussen

Matthew 7:15-20, 2 Corinthians 3:5-6, & 1 John 4:7-8, 20

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

Final Thoughts

As we went through the ENTIRETY of Scripture that speaks about gender identity and sexual relationships among LGBTQIA+ people, we recognized that there are many questions surrounding these texts, uncertainty, and varying interpretations. Some of those interpretations oppose LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships, and some are open to embracing people who are LGBTQIA+.

If, after much thought, discernment, and prayer, we are still uncertain about where to stand, what are we to do? Jesus tells us to look at the fruits, whether the fruit is “good” or “bad”. Paul says we are to see if the thing “kills” or “gives life”. John instructs us to consider whether it fits within “love” or “hate”.

We now have decades and even centuries of evidence concerning how the Church has approached LGBTQIA+ identity and relationships, and the simple reality is this:

- When the Church has sought to judge, condemn, or “convert” LGBTQIA+ people, it has led to bullying and violence, broken families and homeless children, loneliness and depression, killing and suicide. People have literally died because of these interpretations. The fruit of those who preach condemnation has been harm and destruction.
- When the Church has sought to welcome, embrace, and celebrate LGBTQIA+ people in their midst, it has led to healthy relationships, supporting communities, and mental wellbeing. The fruit of those who preach welcome has been love and kindness.

When one is uncertain about the right course, the Christian always has a simple way to determine what is good: Which route will be an expression of love, bringing good and blessings to those effected by my words and deeds, showing them kindness just like my Father in Heaven?