

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - A strong understanding

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[online at interactingwithjesus.org/gaymatter]

We as a church confess that the Bible is our “authoritative source” for “discerning between good and evil” (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4). As we make ethical decisions we look to Scripture—in particular, to clear and repeated statements in Scripture. We want our lives to be guided by a strong understanding of the Word.

A strong understanding of the Word means two things:

- Each text guiding us has strong exegetical certainty (though never “total certainty,” for all texts have uncertainties).

By “strong certainty” I mean we are 70% sure (or perhaps much higher) of the text’s interpretation. This is indeed strong, even as a vote by that percentage is strong.

- The texts guiding us are part of a main trajectory in Scripture, part of the movement toward an ultimate ethic, the Ethic of the Age to Come.

For instance, we know that the verse ‘Slaves, obey your earthly masters’ (Eph. 6:5) does not settle the issue of slavery.” Specific instructions might be intended only for specific situations. So we look for the trajectory, the direction in which God is trying to move humanity. And we see Paul urging Philemon to treat the slave Onesimus as a brother (Philem. 1:15-17). And Paul viewing slave and free as having equal worth: all are one in

Christ (1 Cor. 12:13, Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11) and masters are not higher in God’s eyes (Eph. 6:9). Paul brings his hearers “into an atmosphere in which the institution of slavery could only wilt and die” (F.F. Bruce). This movement is what has meaning; it gives us the Bible’s guidance on slavery, shows God’s will.

Those two points give us the main questions we must answer as we look at 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. (1) Is there an understanding of the passage which has strong (not total) exegetical certainty? And (2) does that understanding fit in with a main movement in Scripture?

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

⁹Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes [malakoi], sodomites [arsenokoitai], ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (NRSV)

Context

As chapter 6 begins, Paul is addressing the problem of persons in the church at Corinth taking each other to civil court when they have been “cheated” by the other (v.7). Since the Romans allowed the Jews (and the Christians) to apply their own law in such matters, Paul counsels the church to do that—to not take each other to court but to find someone in their midst who is wise enough to settle their disputes (v.5). It’s better to let yourself be wronged or cheated, Paul says, than to take each other to court (v.7).

Then Paul starts addressing those who do the wronging, and do it to brothers and sisters (v.8). He says, *Don't you know that wrongdoers won't inherit the kingdom of God?* (vv.9-10). After reciting a list of those who are excluded from the kingdom, Paul then rejoices with the church at Corinth, *Some of you were on this list; but you were washed, you were made holy in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God!* (v.11).

Then in the next verses Paul follows up with repeated admonitions on fleeing sexual immorality (vv.12-20).

Two crucial words in Paul's list of wrongdoers

The Greek word *malakoi* (lit, 'soft ones') was a common word in Greek literature for the passive partner in male sex.

Lexicons define this word as pertaining to "the passive male partner in homosexual intercourse" [Louw & Nida, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains*, volume 1, p. 771-772 (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition 1996)] or "being passive in a same-sex relationship" [Arndt, Danker, & Bauer (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 613 (3rd ed. 2000)]

The Greek word *arsenokoitai* (lit., 'male-bedders') is a reference to males choosing same-sex sex, ie, the active partner.

In the Greek version of the Old Testament that Paul used, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 forbid a man (*arseno*) from lying with (*koiten*) another man (*arseno*). "[T]hese words (excuse the pun) lie side-by-side in these passages in Leviticus. Paul joins these two words together into a neologism, a new word (as we do in saying database or software)." [Stanton L. Jones, <http://www.wheaton.edu/~media/Files/Centers-and-Institutes/CACE/booklets/StantJonesResponsetoMelWhite.pdf>] "[T]he meaning of a compound word does not necessarily add up to the sum of its parts. But in this case I believe the evidence suggests that it does." [Dan O. Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, p. 13 (2003)]

Two main understandings of those words

- Historic: By *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* Paul is intending all same-sex sexual intimacy.

The NIV translates those two words as "men who have sex with men," with this marginal note: *The words men who have sex with men translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.* The ESV translates them as "men who practice homosexuality," with this marginal note: *The two Greek terms*

translated by this phrase refer to the passive and active partners in consensual homosexual acts.

- Revisionist: By *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* Paul is intending only same-sex relations that are exploitive, abusive, or excessive.

"In this text, Paul uses two Greek words—*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*—that likely refer to some forms of male same-sex behavior, but not the modern concept of homosexuality. The predominant forms of same-sex behavior in the ancient world were sex between masters and slaves, sex between adult men and adolescent boys [pederasty], and prostitution. In all those cases, men used sex to express power, dominance and lustfulness, not self-giving love and mutuality. Committed same-sex unions between social equals represent very different values than the types of same-sex behavior Paul would have had in view in 1 Corinthians 6. [Matthew Vines, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/05/us/samesex-scriptures.html]

The historic understanding of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (that Paul refers to men who have sex with men *in general* and not only to abusive forms of same-sex relations) **is strong exegetically, as the following considerations show:**

- Even if the prevalent form of same-sex behavior in the Greco-Roman world was exploitive and excessive, Paul still could have known of consensual, loving forms and could have referred to them.

Such "mature adult to adult sexual partnerships, both male and female, were known" in the Greco-Roman world. [William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, p.84]

Accounts from the early Roman empire show that "they knew a great deal about what people today would regard as longer-term, reasonably stable relations between two people of the same gender" [N.T. Wright, www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/wright.htm]

"[A]ccording to primary source material collected from his time, Paul's world knew of long-term committed, equal gay and lesbian relationships as well as unequal abusive ones." [Mark Thiessen-Nation, *The Mennonite*, June 2014]

- It can appear that Paul wrote of consensual, loving forms of same-sex behavior in Romans 1 when he mentioned lesbian intercourse (v.26) and when he used the phrase “for one another” in describing male-male sexual passion (v.27).

- If Paul was thinking of exploitive, abusive relations, would he have included *malakoi* on his list? This is a list of those sinning, not those being sinned against.

If Paul was using *malakoi* to refer to the young boys or slaves being dominated, would the Spirit have nudged Paul to include them on this list? If the only situation in view was sex that exploits others, would the Spirit have prompted Paul to mention the passive partner, the one being exploited, on this list? Since Paul included *malakoi* on a list of sins, perhaps he was thinking of something consensual, chosen by both partners.

- Was Paul’s intended meaning for the word *arsenokoitai* shaped by the Greco-Roman world or by the Hebrew world? As Paul joined the two words “male” and “bed” from Lev. 18:22 and 20:13, those texts would have been in his mind. Those Hebrew texts do not—indeed cannot— refer to pederasty or the Greco-Roman forms of same-sex practice.

If Paul intended to restrict his focus to exploitive, pederastic sex, there was a common Greek word for pederast (the adult man) that he would have used.

- *Arsenokoitai* cannot mean anything other than the general idea suggested by “male-bedders.” This compound word was so rare in the Greek world that Paul perhaps coined it. It had no chance, through use, to have developed a meaning other than the general concept implied by the words that form it. In other words, its scope would include all male-male sexual intimacy (including loving, committed relationships).

Arguing from its components to what a word means in a particular context is dangerous, with one exception: when the word is so rare or so new that it could not have, through use, shifted away from its inherent morphological meaning.

In summary, it appears that the historic understanding of 1 Cor. 6:9-11 has “strong exegetical certainty.”

Is the historic understanding of 1 Cor. 6:9-11 part of a main theme and trajectory of Scripture?

Yes, it is clear that the historic understanding fits in with a main movement of Scripture: movement towards the life which is God’s dream for the world, the Ethic of the Age to Come.

Here are two of the main trajectories we see in the Old Testament: (1) Movement from external, surface obedience of God’s law to inner, full-hearted obedience.

The community of the OT people of God was built on the Law, the commands God gave them. These were not given arbitrarily but were given to bring human flourishing so that Israel could be a light to the Gentiles. Throughout the history of the OT, Israel often disobeyed or only gave partial obedience. So we see God’s prophets calling the people toward full and complete obedience. As the OT ends, the prophets are speaking of a new covenant when the Spirit will write the Law on the people’s hearts (Ezek. 36:26-27, Jer. 31:33).

(2) Movement from a sense of God loving Israel to a sense of God loving all peoples.

The OT prophets begin speaking of God welcoming those who had been excluded (e.g., Isaiah 56:3-8). Israel’s greatest king, David,

has two Canaanite grandmothers (Tamar, Rahab) and a Moabite grandmother (Ruth).

In the New Testament we see both of these movements clearly continue:

(1) We see God loving and welcoming all, including the poor and marginalized.

This is the Ethic of the Age to Come: people from every tribe and tongue gathering around the throne and the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

The NT church believed that Jesus loved—and died for—all people, including the least and the last; so they likewise chose to love and value all. Because of this, the NT church was more progressive than the Greco-Roman world around them on issues like slavery and women in leadership.

(2) We see God working to deepen our obedience to the moral Law.

Jesus announced that he had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17-20). And he calls his followers beyond surface compliance and toward obedience from the heart: *You've heard, 'don't murder'; I say, don't even hate* (Matt. 5:21-26); *You've heard, 'don't commit adultery'; I say, don't even look in lust* (27-30). Jesus calls his church away from divorce which Moses allowed because of the hardness of hearts and calls them toward the creation intent of the permanence of marriage (Matt. 19:3-9).

This is the Ethic of the Age to Come: no sin, no evil-doers allowed in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27, 22:14-15).

Sexual sins receive much attention. In fact, every NT list of sins includes immorality (*porneia*). At no point do we see Jesus and the early church lessening the OT prohibitions on various forms of what they understood to be sexual immorality. Instead we see the church repeating prohibitions on adultery, incest, prostitution,

etc., and even tightening down on them. Because of this, the NT church was more conservative than the surrounding Greco-Roman world on matters of sexuality.

In conclusion, the historic interpretation of 1 Cor. 6:9-11—that all forms of same-sex sexual intimacy are contrary to the kingdom of God—is, first of all, strong exegetically. And, second, this understanding fits in with a main movement of Scripture; it is part of a theme getting more attention, not less.¹

This passage, 1 Cor. 6:9-11, does indeed give us a “strong understanding,” one we as the people of God must heed and let shape our stance toward same-sex marriage. [Read a similar study on Rom. 1:26-27 at interactingwithjesus.org/rom1.] We are a people committed to submit to any strong understanding of Scripture because we are ones who see the Bible as “the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life” (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4).

¹ Some suggest that homosexuality does not belong in this movement but in the first one (the Gospel moving us to value all people) because it is an issue of rights, like slavery. But no. In the Bible, slavery is in a fundamentally different category than sexuality:

- With slavery, any movement in Scripture is toward its elimination. But with sexual mores, the movement is always toward deeper obedience.
- On slavery the Bible is more freeing than the surrounding culture. But on sex it is consistently more restrictive than the culture.
- As Willard Swartley writes in *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*, God’s new way regarding slavery “emerges from God’s redemptive action, grace, and kingdom justice. ... In contrast, homosexual practice is not related to grace-energized behavior in even a single-text” (p.18)