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New testament scripture on homosexuality

Q. I have a daughter and son-in-law who are practicing Catholics. They are in favor of gay marriage, and my son-in-law says that there is no place in the New Testament where Jesus condemns homosexual acts. So, he says, while homosexual activity may have been prohibited in the Old Testament, it is permissible in the New. Please help me to answer him. (Lancaster, Ohio) A. There are several New Testament passages that speak to the immorality of homosexual acts. Among the most explicit is Romans 1:26-28, where Paul says: “God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity. “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to their undiscerning mind to do what is improper.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 2357) concludes that sacred Scripture “presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity” and that “under no circumstances can they be approved.” The fact that Jesus himself did not directly address the specific question of homosexual acts carries little weight. His intent was not to publish a compendium of moral theology; rarely does Christ address particular moral issues but focuses instead on the broader goals of love of God and love of neighbor. As a faithful and practicing Jew, Jesus accepted and lived by the moral code passed down through Hebrew tradition. Among its tenets (Leviticus 20:13) was that “if a man lies with a male as with a woman, they have committed an abomination; the two of them shall be put to death.” In any discussion, though, of the biblical view of homosexual acts, it must always be pointed out (almost in the same breath) what the catechism is quick to add (No. 2358): “Men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies ... must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.” Q. I have a question about receiving the host at holy Communion. I have cerebral palsy, and I’m thankful that the disability affects me only mildly. However, I have always had trouble making the “table” that we are taught to do when accepting the host. My right hand is affected by the CP, and I can’t quite turn the palm upward. (Nor do I always have the greatest dexterity in picking up small objects.) I used to receive the host on my tongue but stopped that a couple of years ago when we became more conscious about the spread of germs. So these days I usually take the host directly in my (left) palm and then tip it into my mouth. Am I doing the right thing or is there something else that you would recommend? (Boston, Massachusetts) A. May I first compliment you on your devotion to the Eucharist? Your question reflects a clear understanding of the sacredness of this gift. In the Eucharist, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says (No. 1374), “Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.” As to your manner of receiving, I think that you should continue to do exactly as you are doing. The early Fathers of the Church recognized that the hands could be used as a “throne” for accepting the King of Kings. In practice, as the US Conference of Bishops explains, that means: “If one is right-handed, the left hand should rest upon the right. The host will then be laid in the palm of the left hand and then taken by the right hand to the mouth. If one is left-handed, this is reversed. It is not appropriate to reach out with the fingers and take the host from the person distributing.” In your own situation, you are doing all that you can to show the reverence and respect that is due. How often did Jesus get things wrong? (Photo: Shutterstock/CHOAphotographer)For many Christians, opposing homosexuality is as simple as opening the Bible.You could be reading the Old Testament, for example, and come across this particularly harsh passage from Leviticus: “If a man lies with another man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They must be put to death.” Or you might be studying Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and read something like this: “Do not be deceived,” writes Paul: “neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality ... will inherit the kingdom of God.”Now, it’s possible to read Paul’s rhetoric here as something other than a condemnation of same-sex relationships, and many trained theologians have been doing so for years. It’s possible, too, that other biblical passages that have historically been used against gay people, like the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah, could be similarly re-imagined in less anti-gay ways. (Although, since Christ’s own interpretation of that story had nothing to do with homosexuality, one has every right to ask why anti-gay interpretations are so popular.)For decades now, the halls of academia have teemed with well-meaning scholars and bible commentators anxious to show that, actually, the Bible isn’t as anti-gay as we think, and that if we all just followed their hermeneutical lead, we’d see that both the Old and New Testaments speak positively—albeit codedly—of homosexual love. It takes discipline, scholarship, prayer, and sometimes creativity to interpret the Bible in a way that makes sense to us today.This scholarly obsession reached its zenith last week when former president Jimmy Carter said that Jesus would “approve of gay marriage.” Predictably, and rather quickly, commentators on various sides issued statements either agreeing or disagreeing or kind of agreeing with the former president, all of them using the scriptures to make their case.And so continues America’s favorite pastime of declaring unequivocally what Jesus would do.Revisionist hermeneutics can seem pretty silly when we consider who Jesus was. Jesus, a first-century Jewish theologian, would almost certainly have held the traditional Jewish belief about same-sex relations—that is, he would have believed such sexual activity was sinful. Had Jesus departed significantly from Jewish tradition on this front, we can be sure that his disagreement would have been recorded (just like his reconsideration of divorce or his new interpretation of adultery). None of his biographers include a single instance of Jesus challenging the mainstream Jewish understanding of homosexuality, and Jesus more than once affirmed a male-female pattern of coupling as the proper domestic arrangement; it’s safe to conclude, then, that Christ would have agreed with the Levitical assessment of homosexuality as a sin. Any confusion about this seems motivated by contemporary politics, not ancient history.So, if Jesus would have been against homosexuality, then, at least for Christians, that ends the debate, right?Well, no, actually. “Jesus said it, I believe it, that settles it” is a facile mode of Christian logic, and I’d argue that rejecting this logic is actually in line with orthodox Christianity. And I say this as a devout gay Christian who confesses both the divinity of Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures.Let’s take, for the moment, a different example. While the first five books of the Old Testament attribute their authorship to Moses, most critical scholars agree that they were actually written, edited, collected, and anthologized by different people across many generations well after Moses’ death. Even so, biblical literalists spend a good deal of energy defending Mosaic authorship because their entire theory of biblical inerrancy depends upon it. Because Jesus seemed to affirm Mosaic authorship (“If you believed Moses’ writings, you’d have believed me”), these literalists will rely on “what Jesus said” to confute a more comparative, historiographical biblical scholarship.To answer a complicated issue of our day by simply opening the bible and reciting a passage is to misunderstand what the Bible is—and, importantly, what it is not.Though referring to the Torah with the shorthand “Moses” is hardly proof positive that Jesus was wrong about the books’ provenance (many scholars refer to the books metonymically), it’s safe to say that Jesus probably assumed Moses wrote the Pentateuch.And if he did think that, then he was wrong This is a point the Evangelical bible scholar Peter Enns makes in a footnote in his book The Evolution of Adam: “Jesus here reflects the traditon that he himself inherited as a first-century Jew and that his hearers assumed to be the case.” In other words, Enns suggests, Jesus’ knowledge is limited to what was knowable in the first century because—and this is a key point that I’m afraid too many Christians don’t think about nearly enough—Jesus is, in many senses, limited by the first century.As orthodox Christianity affirms, and has always affirmed, Jesus is both fully divine, and fully human. That is, he was born of an earthly mother, had a physical body, experienced hunger, went to the bathroom, etc. His brain was a human brain, and he learned the way any first-century child would learn. When Luke’s gospel says that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, we should take the author at his word.Orthodoxy doesn’t require us to believe that Jesus knew everything, and indeed, there are times in the gospels when Jesus admits to not knowing something. For example, when a person snatches his robe in the hopes of receiving a miracle, he asks his disciples who did that. (Some theologians might argue that Jesus was teaching his disciples some type of spiritual truth; he knew the answer but asked the question for the sake of those around him. The irony is that many who advocate for a “plain reading” of the biblical text when it comes to homosexuality jump through extraordinary interpretive hoops to convince us that Jesus’ questions weren’t really questions.)Orthodoxy also doesn’t require us to believe that Jesus was right about everything. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Jesus was horribly mistaken about the end of the world. In an essay titled “The World’s Last Night,” C.S. Lewis helps us understand the limitations that Jesus was working with:He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else. [Matthew 24:34] is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible. Yet how teasing, also, that within fourteen words of it should come the statement, “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man....” The one exhibition of error and the one confession of ignorance grown side by side. ... The facts then are these: that Jesus professed himself (in some sense) ignorant, and within a moment showed that he really was so.And lest, by some theological leap, we try to interpret Jesus’ failed prediction as some sort of attempt at appearing human (rather than evidence of actually being human), Lewis offers this warning:It would be difficult, and, to me, repellent, to suppose that Jesus never asked a genuine question, that is, a question to which he did not know the answer. That would make of his humanity something so unlike ours as scarcely to deserve the name. I find it easier to believe that when he said, “Who touched me?” he really wanted to know.Based on these two examples alone—Jesus’ question and his thoughts about the world’s end—it’s safe to conclude that Jesus didn’t know everything. Daniel Kirk, associate professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, said in a phone interview that he thinks it’s important for Christians to “acknowledge Jesus’ limitations and the fact that he made mistakes.” Kirk refers to the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 A.D., which forcefully affirms that though Jesus is “without sin,” he is nevertheless “in all things like unto us.” There’s a difference, says Kirk, who has written a forthcoming book about Jesus’ humanity, between sinning and getting something wrong. Jesus, whose mind is a product of his first-century upbringing, had a different worldview than we do. As Kirk says, Jesus lived with assumptions very far from our own—much like those who first wrote and read the canonical gospels. (Kirk, it should be noted, is leaving his position at Fuller at the close of the academic year, largely because of his progressive views on homosexuality.)Jesus and the scriptures that tell of his good news are products of their ancient environment. We can’t read the bible expecting to find a robust 21st-century cosmology any more than we can read the bible hoping to find an evolved anthropology or a position on the Confederate flag or the Pythagorean theorem. Or, for that matter, an elaborate position on human sexuality that takes into account all the advances the social sciences have made in the past few decades. Given what we know about Jesus’ humility, why wouldn’t he be open to changing his mind?What the bible most decidedly is not is some type of handbook for navigating the 21st century. It is not God, nor should it be awarded godlike status. (To treat it as such is to break the second commandment.) Are there universal truths contained with the pages of the bible? Absolutely! Are many of those truths relevant in every age and culture, and binding to Christians everywhere? Definitely—loving your neighbor, forgiving your enemies, and looking out for the weak are obligations that Christ has put upon each person who that claims to follow him. Are there passages of Scripture that should be read as if they are describing historical events that actually transpired in this world? Of course—the physical resurrection of Jesus is a non-negotiable tenet of the Christian faith.But what about the story where God creates the entire universe in six 24-hour periods? What about all of the laws described in the Torah, like the one that forbids wearing different fabrics together, or planting different kinds of seeds in the same field? What about the law that demands rebellious children be stoned to death? Or Jesus’ admonition to sell all you own and donate the money to the poor?The Bible we have today is an anthology of many different writings created and edited by a diverse group of writers and redactors from different socioeconomic and historical strata. It takes discipline, scholarship, prayer, and sometimes creativity to interpret the Bible in a way that makes sense to us today. No one would conclude that Jesus wants sinners to literally chop off their hands, even though that’s a command he gives in the gospels. We reach that conclusion by using our common sense and wisdom to interpret that specific Scripture within the overall ethos of Christ’s message.If the essence of Torah is love, as Jesus says it is, then committed gay relationships hardly fall afoul of the Bible.The writings from the New Testament period are the written record of Jesus’ followers trying to work out his life, what he said, and what it all meant. Two thousand years later, we are still “working out” the memory of Jesus. Sometimes, as with discussions of diplomacy and peace, working out this memory means applying Jesus’ own principles to the debate. And sometimes, as with slavery—a system to which Jesus referred, though never condemned—working out this memory means complicating it and showing it to be limited by historical ignorance.To put it in a more ornery way—perhaps in the spirit of a certain Jewish prophet—it’s the memory of Jesus that allows me, that compels me, to question the memory of Jesus, and, when necessary, to challenge his worldview, which is so obviously limited by his ancient context. After all, it’s Jesus who made a career out of questioning the received wisdom of religious authorities. “You’ve heard it said like this,” he would suggest, “but why not reconsider it this way?” Given what we know about Jesus’ humility, why wouldn’t he be open to changing his mind?Kirk reminded me of an example from the gospels where Jesus actually has his mind changed by, of all people, a Canaanite woman. When she comes to ask Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus says that his ministry was primarily for Jews. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs,” he says, which is almost as embarrassing a statement as the one Lewis discusses above. In her desperation, the woman famously replies, “But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table,” and Jesus ends up obliging her and healing her child.So did this woman actually change the Son of God’s mind?“I think so,” Kirk says. Similarly, it’s not that difficult to imagine Jesus’ mind being changed today on the issue of homosexuality. Were Jesus to befriend gay couples committed to each other in love and fidelity, I find it tough to believe he would reject their relationships on the grounds that all same-sex love is necessarily abominable. As John Caputo argues in What Would Jesus Deconstruct?, though critics might try to convince us that gay love is something other than love, that position seems both ignorant and arrogant. If the essence of Torah is love, as Jesus says it is, then committed gay relationships are hardly unbiblical.It’s safe to say that Jesus was opposed to homosexuality when he walked this Earth. But by thinking along with, or inside of, the memory of Jesus, which is dynamic and always contemporary, and constantly on the move, we can hazard a guess that this same Jesus—who is always coming to the aid of those cast out of polite society, who is always challenging religious ideologues, who is constantly wrestling with the scriptures and re-imagining their applications—might some day find himself being asked to create wine at a gay wedding.

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