

## **Homosexuality, Polyester, and Shellfish**

Homosexuality, polyester, and shellfish.

What do these three things have in common? Well, they are all mentioned in the Bible as forbidden by God. And the latter two come up in conversations about the first. The charge is often that Christians are being inconsistent – we allow polyester and enjoy shellfish, but we still condemn homosexuality.

The real question is not why Christians are inconsistent. The real question is why and how Christians make a distinction between homosexuality, polyester, and shellfish. Because they do, and it matters.

The short answer is because Scripture demands that we must. The long answer is that when we take into account some basic hermeneutical principles and some Scriptural principles, we realize that we must relate differently to homosexuality than to shellfish.

### **Basic Hermeneutical Principles**

*Scripture is a revelation of God.* Because Scripture comes from the one and only God, it is true and authoritative. It reveals the mind and will of God. Because Scripture is revelation, it is superior to all other claims of authority. Though the Bible has two sections – the Old and New Testaments – it does not mean there is a totally different Bible for two different eras. They are not two distinct revelations, but two sections of one revelation. And this one revelation applies to us today.

*The central unifying theme of Scripture is Jesus Christ.* The Old Testament is about Jesus Christ, and various promises, pictures, and prophecies of His coming. The New Testament reveals the life and short-term impact of this Christ. Therefore, all passages of Scripture need to be thought of in light of what they tell us about this Christ. This includes the sections of the Old Testament which seemingly no longer directly apply to us. In order to make these distinctions, it is necessary to properly understand the definitions of the moral, ceremonial, and civil laws of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>

*The civil laws were given to a unique nation (Israel) for a unique purpose and time.* The civil laws were those laws that “governed the everyday affairs of ancient Israel. They showed how Israel was to live as a people of God (theocracy). After the Babylonian captivity, when the kingship had ceased, the notion of a theocracy was no longer applicable. Thus, there were no further occasions for the application of the civil laws... Hence the Christian is not obligated to keep them.”<sup>2</sup> When Christ came, and the gospel went freely to all nations, the church stopped being a nation-state imposing civil penalties.<sup>3</sup> The remaining value of the civil law for Christians today lies in the general principles that are encouraged.<sup>4</sup>

*The ceremonial laws pointed to Christ’s sacrifice and were abolished by His sacrifice.* The ceremonial laws “governed Israel’s tabernacle and temple ceremonies. They include laws for carrying out sacrifices and offerings and those that regulate the activities of the priests.”<sup>5</sup> These laws included a “complex set of rules for ceremonial purity and cleanness. You could only approach God in worship if you ate certain foods and

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<sup>1</sup> See Westminster Confession of Faith XIX.3-4; Second Helvetic Confession XII.1. Philipp Ross’s book, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Ross-Shire, UK: Mentor, 2010) presents an academic defense of this distinction.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 546.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller, “Old Testament Law and the Charge of Inconsistency.” Retrieved June 11, 2012 from [http://redeemer.com/news\\_and\\_events/newsletter/?aid=363](http://redeemer.com/news_and_events/newsletter/?aid=363)

<sup>4</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith XIX.4.

<sup>5</sup> Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 546.

not others, wore certain forms of dress, refrained from touching a variety of objects, and so on. This vividly conveyed, over and over, that human beings are spiritually unclean and can't go into God's presence without purification."<sup>6</sup> This purification pointed to the need for Christ. Once Christ came and died, these ceremonial laws were no longer needed because the Levitical priesthood and the temple were replaced. Since the ceremonial laws are no longer necessary, Hebrews 9-10 reveals that Christians do not have to keep them.<sup>7</sup>

*The moral laws define sin and continue in force.* The moral laws are the basic ideas of right and wrong that were implanted in the conscience of humanity at creation, were "formulated in the Mosaic law, and they continue to be true. The moral law is what makes up the basic principles of right and wrong that lie behind the Mosaic law."<sup>8</sup> Since the moral law is the declaration of the will of God to humans of all time, it directs and binds each one to absolute conformity and obedience (Deut. 5, Matt. 5). What God forbids in the moral law is at no time to be allowed, and what He commands is always our duty. This does not only apply to certain populations or aspects of life, but to the entirety of all humanity, so that people would realize that before God they will have no excuses, so their consciences would be awakened, so they would see their need for a Savior since they cannot keep this law themselves.<sup>9</sup>

*Homosexuality falls under the moral law.* Of the three things in discussion - homosexuality, polyester, and shellfish - only homosexuality falls under the moral law. How can we know?

The first way is by looking at what is condemned in the New Testament. Polyester and shellfish are not condemned in the New Testament. On the contrary, Acts 10 reveals that food that was unclean in the Old Testament could now be eaten. But that same freedom is not granted to homosexuality. Homosexuality is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, and in both Testaments it is clearly identified as a sin. The moral prohibitions against it are explicitly repeated in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup> In Matthew, Sodom and Gomorrah are continued to be held up as models of punishment. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul, in restating the moral law, brackets homosexuality with heterosexual adultery.<sup>11</sup>

Another way we know homosexuality belongs to the moral law rather than the civil or ceremonial law lies in its history. Homosexuality had nothing to do with the sacrificial system. Nor was it just a civil law for Israel. Sodom was punished for its homosexuality 400 years before the Israelite's civil law was passed down. It is a universal moral issue. "Simply because the Mosaic prohibition against homosexuality is mentioned in Leviticus does not mean that it was part of the ceremonial law that has passed away. If this were so, then neither would rape, incest, and bestiality be morally wrong, since they are condemned in the same chapter with homosexual sins (Lev. 18:6-14, 22-23). Homosexual sins among Gentiles, who did not have the ceremonial law, were also condemned by God. It was for this very reason that God brought judgment on the Canaanites (18:1-3, 25)."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Keller, "The Charge of Inconsistency."

<sup>7</sup> See also Belgic Confession of Faith Article 25.

<sup>8</sup> Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 546.

<sup>9</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism, Question and Answers 93-99.

<sup>10</sup> See Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; and Jude 7.

<sup>11</sup> More Scripture will be considered in the next section.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 262.

For Christians today, the coming of Christ changed the details of how we worship but not the principles by which we live.<sup>13</sup> That is why we must distinguish between the universal moral laws and the ceremonial laws or dietary laws which are not maintained.<sup>14</sup>

*The punishments for the moral law have changed.* Just because the moral law still applies, it does not mean the same civil punishment still applies. One of the ways this is most evident is in considering the punishments associated with shellfish and sexual sin. Already in Leviticus, there was “a difference in punishment for violating the ceremonial law by eating pork or shrimp, which was a few days isolation, and that for homosexuality, which was capital punishment (18:29).”<sup>15</sup> Today, there is no punishment for eating shellfish or wearing polyester, and a lesser consequence for homosexuality.

To maintain the punishment of the civil law for moral sin is to “ignore the specific example of Jesus in refusing to condemn the adulterous woman to death by stoning (John 8:3-11), and his specific teaching that the remedy for adultery is now divorce not death (Matthew 19:9).”<sup>16</sup> Jesus did not exact the Old Testament civil punishment, but rather showed love. Yet, he upheld the moral law by not condoning the behavior, as he still told her to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Homosexuality is still sin.

*The Old Testament needs to be understood in light of the New Testament.* We cannot read the Old Testament without considering what the New Testament says about it. God’s intentions only become clearer when we understand how the life and revelation of Jesus Christ changes things. That is why “when the Old Testament directives are clearly affirmed in the New Testament, we must affirm them as normative for our moral actions and character (i.e., homosexual behavior). When practices and directives go contrary to the New Testament, the latter clearly takes precedence (i.e., circumcision).”<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the examples of eating shellfish or pork, polyester clothes are two examples of the civil and judicial laws of the Jews which “express the will of God for them in their peculiar circumstances, and which of course are intended to be binding only so long as the special conditions to which they are appropriate exist.”<sup>18</sup> These laws reinforced to the Israelites the holiness of their God, and were part of theonomic law, which is no longer literally valid in the New Testament. Therefore, we should not try to make the United States a theocracy.<sup>19</sup>

*The Old Testament law is still relevant today.* When we consider that 2 Timothy 3:16 says all Scripture (including the laws of the Pentateuch) is useful for us today, we have to ask, how are the civil and ceremonial laws relevant? No longer in a literal sense, but its rich principles and lessons for living are still relevant when interpreted through New Testament teaching.<sup>20</sup>

But what about all those passages in the New Testament that say Christians are now dead to the law? “When the New Testament says that Christians are dead to the law, it means that Christ has fulfilled the law (the covenant of works) for the believer, and removed the curse of the law through His sacrificial

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<sup>13</sup> Keller, “The Charge of Inconsistency.”

<sup>14</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 2:264-65.

<sup>15</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 262.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Edwards, ed., *Homosexuality: The Straight Agenda* (Leominster, UK: DayOne, 1998), 109.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002),

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<sup>18</sup> A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002), 250.

<sup>19</sup> See Westminster Confession of Faith XIX.4.

<sup>20</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 336.

death.... Christ did not get rid of the moral law. He obeyed it perfectly for the believer. He died to remove the guilt of sin and He sends the Holy Spirit so believers have the power to obey God's law."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Christ has paid the penalty for lawbreaking. He obeyed it perfectly so we do not have to, and yet the moral law still applies to us. And because it reveals God's standard for His people, it is just.<sup>22</sup>

So, since the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, and we can distinguish between various Old Testament commands, what does the Bible say about homosexuality?

### **Relevant Scriptural Principles**

*God created all things, including sexuality.* All things were created by God, for the glory of God. This includes sexuality. "God's original creative intent is manifested in the creation of male and female in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:27). Human sexuality is reflected in the differentiation of two, not three or four, sexual genders, or some androgynous combination of the two... Sexual differentiation is the basis of human marriage, procreation, and family life, which is the primal form of human community."<sup>23</sup> Because it is His gift, He alone holds the "prerogative to define and limit sexuality."<sup>24</sup>

*All humans are God's creation.* All humans (including homosexuals) have the capacity to know and glorify God (Romans 1:20). We are all God's creatures.

*Sex has a limited role and purpose in life.* Sexual joy and satisfaction are not what makes a fulfilling life. "Two of the greatest deceptions that Satan has managed to sow are that 'whatever you feel, you are,' and 'if it feels good, do it.' Restraint is regarded as repressive today and sexual experimentation is openly encouraged.... [Yet] if we were all to give way to our base instincts, the world would know even greater pain and chaos. Is it being true to oneself to give way to every ungodly lust, however natural it may feel?"<sup>25</sup> But God has made a role for sex, and said that all sex should occur within a heterosexual marriage. The idea of heterosexual relationship is clear when considering that God created Adam male and Eve female and commanded the two of them to have children (Genesis 1:27-28; 2:24).

*Sin impacts all of life, including sex.* Because of sin, all of human life including sexuality, no longer reflects the divine intent. There is no human who can deny any sexual sin. All conflict in relationships, all lust, all perversion, whether heterosexual or homosexual, reflects the sinful heart and motivations of man.<sup>26</sup> That is why still today, all sexual sin is wrong and deserving of consequence – not just homosexuality (Exodus 20:14, Matt. 5:28).

*Homosexuality is a consequence of sin.* Because humans prefer to serve themselves rather God, God let them suffer the consequences of that choice. And homosexuality is a consequence of that sin (Romans 1:24-27). Today, it is "a sign that we are all under the judgment of God and are in desperate need of the good news of Jesus."<sup>27</sup> But it is not just a consequence of sin – it is a sin.

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<sup>21</sup> Brian M. Schwertley, *What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?* (Holt, MI: Reformation Forum, n.d.), 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 2:267.

<sup>23</sup> John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 121.

<sup>24</sup> R. Albert Mohler, *Desire and Deceit: The Real Cost of the New Sexual Tolerance* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008),

<sup>25</sup> Edwards, *Homosexuality*, 186.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, *Homosexuality*, 107.

*Scripture states that homosexuality is sinful behavior.* Genesis 18:16-19:29 indicates that homosexual rape was the evidence of Sodom and Gomorrah's corruption. But it is not just forcible rape that was wrong, as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 reveal that all sexual activity between men is not permitted. Deuteronomy 23:17, 18 forbids prostitution of either sex. In the New Testament, Paul confirms this part of the moral law in Romans 1:25-27, stating that homosexual activity is sinful. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 he writes that those who continue to engage in homosexual activity will not enter heaven.

*Homosexuality is not the only sin in society.* While homosexuality is the raging topic of the day, Scripture seems to place it in a greater context. It is not the only judgment of God on society, as gossip, greed, and rejection of parental authority are also sins that are evidence of God's judgment. Heterosexual promiscuity, theft, drunkenness, and slander are others sins that exclude from the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Jesus even says that unbelief and refusing to repent in spite of religious knowledge are greater sins than those of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 11:24).

*Sinners, including homosexual sinners, can receive salvation.* Jesus himself said he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32; 2 Peter 3:9). "Because homosexual activity is a sin, homosexuals are candidates for salvation.... The Bible's emphasis on sin is not mean to drive us away from God to destruction and despair, but to show us our desperate need of the redemption accomplished by Christ and to call us to faith in Him. After all the Christian message is one of forgiveness and only a person who has done wrong can be forgiven."<sup>28</sup> "The church of Jesus Christ is made up of one hundred per cent of moral failures. But they are moral failures who have been given a new life and a new lifestyle."<sup>29</sup>

*Believers cannot be characterized as having a homosexual life.* It is obvious in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 that Paul teaches that homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom. However, "the reference here is to unbelievers, since Paul said to the believers at Corinth, 'and that is what some of you were' (v. 11). In other words, no believer can be characterized by such a life. Although believers are capable of slipping into any sin, nonetheless no one who continually practices a homosexual lifestyle can be a believer. For 'no one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God' (1 John 3:9)."<sup>30</sup>

*Victory over sin, including homosexuality, is possible.* Thankfully, God does not leave sinners in their sin. He promises that though the battle will rage, victory over sin is available and guaranteed to those who believe (1 Peter 2). "The only way to deal with the problem of sin is to trust the transforming power of the gospel and the renewal that comes to the believer in Christ. Even then, struggle with sexual temptation will persist – but not without hope and healing."<sup>31</sup>

## **Basic Relational Principles**

So, if New Testament Scripture says shellfish and polyester are okay, and homosexuality is not okay, how should Christians who eat shellfish and wear polyester relate to homosexuals?

*Remember that salvation is more important than being heterosexual, or outlawing same-sex marriage.* "The primary message we have for the world is that Jesus died on the cross for sinners. We are to be agents of

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<sup>28</sup> Edwards, *Homosexuality*, 107-108.

<sup>29</sup> Edwards, *Homosexuality*, 108.

<sup>30</sup> Geisler, *Ethics*, 270-71.

<sup>31</sup> R. Albert Mohler, *Desire and Deceit: The Real Cost of the New Sexual Tolerance* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008),

grace, mercy and forgiveness in a harsh and cruel world.”<sup>32</sup> Because “it is not the law that will change the homosexual, but grace. The law kills, but the Spirit gives life. Christians and Christian churches must be sympathetically aware of those with homosexual tendencies and must seek to show them the kindness and counsel that Jesus showed to the sexually immoral with whom he came in contact. We must always have the words of the Apostle ringing in our ears – ‘that is what some of you were’ (1 Corinthians 6:11).”<sup>33</sup>

*Homosexuality is being used as a cultural battleground.* Culture is trying to remove itself from God, and is using sex as a battleground. Homosexuality “is one part of a whole package. The prohibition of homosexual behavior is not simply an isolated result of what is presently called ‘homophobia,’ that is, an irrational fear of a practice we do not understand. Rather, it is seen as one more manifestation of a total approach to sexuality, an approach that denies any boundaries in creation and uses sex as a vehicle to make that statement.”<sup>34</sup>

*Fear and hatred of homosexuals are not proper responses.* Even while disagreeing with the homosexual position and agenda, Christians should never turn to fear-mongering or hatred. Because then some of the public reaction to Christians is validated. We need to prove that “the arguments against the homosexuals’ deviant behavior no more deserve to be called productive of homophobia than arguments against stealing should be called productive of kleptophobia.... Laws against drunk driving do not thereby discriminate against drinkers. One can be opposed to alcoholism without being opposed to alcoholics.”<sup>35</sup> Christians need to remember that hating homosexuals, and “gay bashing”, are also sin, as they represent forms of the sins of slander, violence, and scorn against our neighbor.

*Christians need to show grace to those who misunderstand.* That includes showing grace and patience to those who misunderstand our position. It includes showing love to all of our neighbors, including homosexuals, by really understanding the issues they are struggling with, listening before speaking, coming alongside, and praying for them. It includes not being hateful or ignorant, so that the stereotypes of Christians in the media could be dismantled. Just as we do not always wish to be lumped together with all other “Christians,” we do not expect all homosexuals to hold identical positions, and therefore we must listen carefully in order to understand.

*Addressing the issue of homosexuality gives the church a unique opportunity to witness.* This witness needs to be one of the love, mercy, and grace of the Savior, and of the gospel as the only means of salvation.<sup>36</sup> It needs to witness that we know we are not better. It needs to witness of the unconditional love that Christ showed us by loving us first. It needs to witness that regeneration and sanctification do give new desires and passions to people. “Our primary job is not to save America. Our first responsibility is not to preserve our freedoms, important though they are. Our responsibility is to stand for Christ, witnessing to His grace and power.”<sup>37</sup>

*All ministry on earth (apart from Christ’s) is from sinners to sinners.* That means Christians should not elevate themselves to be judge, but elevate God and His Word. It means that Christians will address their own sins, and those alive and active in their own local community, before addressing the sins of others (Matt. 7:3-5).

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<sup>32</sup> Erwin Lutzer, *The Truth about Same-Sex Marriage* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 98.

<sup>33</sup> Edwards, *Homosexuality*, 110-111.

<sup>34</sup> Charles W. Keysor, ed., *What You Should Know About Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 52.

<sup>35</sup> Geisler, *Ethics*, 273.

<sup>36</sup> Mohler, *Desire and Deceit*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Lutzer, *The Truth*, 103.

*Love sometimes demands non-approval.* Those who love are not those who affirm everything everyone says, but those who show the truth in both word and deed. Therefore Christians will not approve of homosexuality. Love does not allow all behavior to continue, especially if it is destructive. And we will all suffer the cultural consequences if sin is celebrated and encouraged: “To the skeptics reading this: Just suppose for a moment that the Bible is the Word of God, and this same word condemns homosexuality. Suppose, furthermore, that God created children to need both a father and a mother to model gender diversity. Suppose that homosexuality in the end is destructive not just to society but to the individual homosexuals themselves. Supposing all the above are true, would it be “hateful” to oppose same-sex marriage?”<sup>38</sup>

Therefore the difference between homosexuality, polyester, or shellfish is not a reactionary choice between homophobia or vestiphobia or ichthyophobia. It is not an inconsistent personal preference.

It is a principled decision based on divine revelation.

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<sup>38</sup> Lutzer, *The Truth*, 41.