

Tricky Texts in a Nutshell

Reconciling in Christ Task Force at Bethel Lutheran Church



There are several *tricky texts* that have prevented Christians from welcoming people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. They are *tricky* because they have been used to condemn our neighbors and siblings made in God's image. When we read them in their historical context or attend to how translators have changed their meanings in the Bibles we use.



In the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus does not concern itself with sexuality but with idolatry. Its authors are concerned that people of Israel do not engage in religions that are unholy. "If a man [*ish*] ... lie with mankind [*zakhar*, NASB: 'a male'], as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination [*to'ebhah*, NASB: 'detestable act']; they shall surely be put to death...." (Leviticus 18; King James Version). The King James translators chose to translate this passage contrary to what is now known – that the second word, *zakhar*, concerns male humans or animals who are made available for religious prostitution. There is a similar prohibition in the book of Deuteronomy.



In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the relative of Abraham named Lot brings his family to the city of Sodom to seek refuge. Nomads and wanderers in the ancient world need to do this and Sodom took advantage of travelers. They robbed them, assaulted them, and did not offer them any refuge. Both Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well as the prophet Ezekiel use the memory of Sodom to condemn their contemporaries for lacking hospitality and failing to take care of the poor among them. The Bible shows every bit of concern about abuse of strangers; it is an accident that the city's name came to be associated with homosexuality.



Paul condemns his contemporaries who take advantage of children, abusing them sexually. He does this in two places, in his Letter to the Romans and his First Letter to the Corinthians. In Romans he refers to "unnatural" relations between men and men and women and women. In the First Letter to the Corinthians he writes that "Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, μαλακοὶ, ἀρσενοκοῖται ... none of these will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9b, 10). These terms in Greek refer to specific kinds of religious prostitution and activities similar to what we would today call child trafficking. Paul is seriously concerned with the abuse of children and thinks that those sorts of practices are signs of a fallen world and deserve to be opposed by followers of Christ.

How Did these *Texts* Get So *Tricky*?

If these *tricky texts* are not what they have often been taken to be, how did they get that way and what can Christians do about this misuse of the Bible?

*Remember that we are dealing with very old books of the Bible and that the long history that stands between us and it matters in how the Bible has translated and been used. Work with patience and openness to learning about the Bible and our history.

*Remember that there is a deep history, especially since the 13th Century, of criminalizing sexuality of all kinds, including homo and heterosexuality. Sexuality has only recently been decriminalized. This legacy still stays with us and has shaped how our Bibles have been translated and used. Work to promote justice and repair for all people.

*Remember that marriage has changed considerably over the centuries. With the advent of gender equality, marrying for friendship, and reproductive technology, what the Bible means by marriage is often shaped by a society very different from our own. We have to keep in mind that how men and women were treated cannot easily be applied today even as our Bibles owe their language to earlier times and places.

*Remember that Christians have had a hard time talking about sexuality for ages! We can disagree with our fellow Christians, present and ancient, and still hold the same faith in Jesus and pursue the same hope in Jesus. Advocate healthy and gracious conversations about sexuality.

*Remember that Lutherans have a gracious way of approaching the Bible:

1. We read the Bible as something from the past and bring the promise of Jesus to it today.
2. We read the Bible with people who are affected by it and we read it in the company of all the saints, looking for the gospel in its pages. We never read the Bible alone because it is for the whole people of God and is about the whole world. So we need to listen to what they say about it as well.
3. We rely on scholars, teachers, and interpreters of all kinds to make sense of this great text for our life in faith.