

Does the Bible Condemn Homosexuality?

An Interview with Dr Reverend Cheri DiNovo.

As the debate rages over the legality and morality of same sex marriages, many Christians rely on the Bible as their guide. Many believe that the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality, and they provide specific passages to back up their claim.

We decided to give the other side of the debate a chance to answer. So, we interviewed Reverend Dr Cheri DiNovo, a United Church Minister who has performed a dozen same-sex marriages in Canada. She has also written a Ph.D. thesis on the subject of how Christianity deals with the outcasts of society.

In this interview, we asked Reverend Dr DiNovo to explain her perspective on three often-quoted biblical passages that seem to condemn homosexuality.

THE TURNING: Well, let's go through the Bible and take a look at some of the passages which people often quote when condemning homosexuality. Starting in the beginning with **Genesis 19**, we have the story of **Sodom and Gomorrah**, where Lot invites two men into his home, not knowing that they are really angels. Soon, a crowd forms outside the house, demanding that the strangers be sent out so they can be raped. Lot refuses, and offers

his virgin daughters instead. How do you read this in terms of an attitude towards homosexuality?

DiNovo: Well, first of all it's important to remark that this passage is not about homosexuality. In fact, it has nothing to do with homosexuality. It's about welcoming, it's about the theology of hospitality, which is the great theology, biblically speaking, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelations. So, always and everywhere, the bible tells us to be welcoming and hospitable to strangers, especially strangers who are not like us. So here come some strangers into your town, so what do you do with them. The great sin of Sodom, for which it was punished, is the abuse of the strangers. It has nothing to do with how they were abused. That is irrelevant to the story. Anything could have happened. It is the fact that they were abused at all that is the point of the story.

It is not a question of sexual ethics, because it is absurd to say that it's okay to send your virgin daughters out to be gang-raped, but it's not okay to have strangers gang-raped. And that would be an absurd reading of it, but that would be a literalist reading of it, if you want to take it at face value, without any thought involved. I think there's a great deal

of prevarication when talking about this. People just throw Sodom and Gomorrah out as if they know what it's about. They either don't know what it's about or if they've actually studied the bible in obvious detail, they'd see that it's not about homosexuality. It's a smokescreen.

THE TURNING: And yet, this story has cast an enormous shadow over Christianity. We speak of 'sodomy' because of this story. It suggests that church leaders over the centuries have considered this story to be about homosexuality.

DiNovo: I know, and isn't that absurd. That truly is prevarication, it clearly speaks to an agenda of the church, and that agenda is about hegemony and control, and it's always about control over those places where people feel the most vulnerable, and that's in their sexuality and in their ethical dealings with each other. Where the church wields the hammer the most, that's where you should question it the most. This is one of those texts that has simply been abused by the church.

THE TURNING: I guess it begs the question, had the angels appeared as women, what would have happened in the house?

DiNovo: Well, the same thing, it would have made no difference, except that sodomy wouldn't be a part of our vocabulary. But another thing to point out about the biblical period: there was no such thing as homosexuality in the biblical era, neither in the Hebrew scripture era

nor in the New Testament era. Homosexuality did not exist as a term or as a person. Homosexuality as a person was invented in the nineteenth century, as a pathology.

At the time the Bible was written, both the Hebrew scripture and the New Testament, homosexual acts were just variations of sexual acts. We remember that during the Greek era when the New Testament was written, homosexuality between an older man and a younger man was seen as a very common form of mentoring. It was average, it was not frowned upon. Where we see Paul and others in the New Testament railing about what seems like homosexuality, what they're actually railing about is manipulation of youth. It's really more pedophilia that they're railing at in that context, especially among the Greeks themselves and the whole Greek mythic structure. They're railing against the Greek way of life. And part of that way of life was this initiation procedure with young boys, and it's really pedophilia, and the kind of power imbalance which that implies is really the problem.

So, homosexuality is really a bad translation in this context. There were no 'homosexuals' at that time, there were only adults having sex in various ways, and one of those was having sex with their own gender.

THE TURNING: So, just to put that in context, would most of the men who were having sex with boys also be married to women?

DiNovo: Oh, absolutely. This was a patriarchy, so you want your name to be carried on. You have to remember that marriage was not what it is now, either. Marriage in biblical times was usually polygamy, and women had the status of cattle, they were purchased with gold, and they were really there to have children for the men. They were not seen as a man's prime object of sexual attraction. Maybe there was a component of that, but that was not really the key component. Marriage was to produce children. And to produce the patriarch's children, with the patriarch's name.

So marriage didn't have very much to do with sex, and the classic example of that is Solomon and his thousand wives. That's in the same breath as the Ten Commandments' injunction against committing adultery. Well, what does it mean not to commit adultery in a community that would allow you to have one thousand wives? How much energy does one guy have, you know? Clearly, there's something else at work here than sexual prohibition. Again, we have to see things in context, in terms of the differences between their world and our modern world.

Leviticus : "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination." 19:22

THE TURNING: Okay, well, let's continue our march through the Bible, and get to Leviticus, where God says to Moses, among many other things, " You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination."

DINOVO: Okay, so, here you have the Jews differentiating themselves from the other great cultures of their day. In Leviticus you will find another six hundred strictures as well, including against eating shellfish, as well as spitting on the floor, prohibitions about women having their periods. There's all sorts of stuff there that we would now throw out, with very little thought. We would say, this is a people with very little in common with our people who have prohibitions for all sorts of strange reasons, and this would be of interest to a cultural anthropologist maybe, but it is certainly not anything we're going to live our lives by.

This is Rabbinical wisdom, this is not mine: the ban against homosexual sex acts is of the same order as not eating shellfish. So, if the Religious Right condemned the eating of shellfish in the same breath as homosexual acts, then maybe they would have it in context.

What's really true about Leviticus, and what kosher is about, is being mindful. Mindfulness about what you do, how you do it and why you do it. Mindful about the fact that God is aware of what you are doing, and God is present in what you are doing, and so you do it in a spirit of holiness. That holiness is imbued in every moment of your life. So, when you're washing your dishes, what fork you use, what you eat with, all of this has to do with God in some beautiful and brilliant way. So, it's not about what fork you use, it's not about who you sleep with, it's about

the mindfulness in which you engage in sexual acts, it's not about eating shellfish, it's about the mindfulness of the food that you put into your mouth - where did it come from, what pain when into producing it. So, that's what Leviticus is about, and this is what gets lost.

THE TURNING: We've received a fair bit of mail at the magazine from people who read the Bible quite literally ...

DINOVO: I wish they did! I wish they read it more literally, I wish they actually read it. My problem with literalists and fundamentalists is that they don't actually read it, because if they did, it would be very difficult to uphold these kinds of arguments, the hatred of homosexuals, for example. It simply isn't there. What they have done very successfully is taken one passage out of context, without studying it, and then used that to beat up their neighbors. I really wish people would study the bible more, it's not a question of studying it less, or being less literal. I wish people would actually study the words there, i.e., being a bit more literalist about it. That would lead to a whole different conclusion.

THE TURNING: And if you go down that Leviticus list, it says you should never even see your own sister naked. So, if this is what God said to Moses, and hence to the rest of us, how does one pick and choose out of that list?

DINOVO: The bible is designed to be read in community, and then to

be debated and discussed. It's not a fait accompli. This is why in the midrashic traditions there are libraries full of texts asking 'what does it all mean?' And we Christians have libraries full, called theology, asking 'what does it all mean?'. The reason for this is that we don't know, we can never know for sure. So this is a book that is meant to be read out loud in community, so we can all hear it, all think our different thoughts, and then we all come together to discuss it. That is the purpose of it, and that was the way it was meant to be used. It was originally a partly oral tradition handed on down, and discussed, 'What does this mean? What do you think this means, these words of our tribal elders? What implications does this have for our lives?' It's not an immediate prescription. This is a book that is designed to engender a lot of things, prayer among them, worship, all sorts of things, but it was never meant to be read as a prescription for people.

You know, you look at the stories in the Bible, and you wonder how does this show me how to live my life? I mean, the story of Jonah or Noah -- what we are we supposed to do, when it rains go out and build an ark? It would be an absurd way of reading it, we don't read any text that way. What we do is that we read it and then we discuss what it really means, and that's exactly the tradition from which it comes, and has been from the beginning of it's writing.

Homosexuality in the New Testament

THE TURNING: Well, let's jump ahead then to the New Testament. In Corinthians there is a section which reads:

' Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God. Do not be deceived, neither fornicators nor idolaters or adulterers nor homosexuals nor sodomites nor thieves nor covetous nor drunkards nor revilers nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.' (9-10)

Homosexuals are clearly mentioned, at least in this translation. What is this text trying to say?

DINOVO: What if all of our emails which we sent to our friends would be saved for two thousand years, collated, put together as a series of letters, written basically as holy scripture? There'd be some pretty wacky stuff in them. And some of our emails were clearly meant for particular people at a particular time, for a particular situation.

The letter to the people at Corinth was exactly that - written at a particular time, to a particular people, in a particular situation.

At Corinth they were having basically orgiastic meetings, people kind of blending in an interesting (sexual) way, taking what was in the old pagan religions and in the new Christian story. Among the Greeks, there were temple prostitutes, and so here in Corinth you had this decidedly unJewish living out of the

story! There were wild parties, fornication and all sorts of wild things happening. So Paul is kind of ranting at them here, saying clean up your act, this is not what church should be about. Now, again, we have to remember that Paul himself is a human, this is not the word of God. This is the word of a first-century male, and he is writing in a patriarchy, and he is writing to a culture that he finds loathsome as a Jew. He grew up with Leviticus, where you're supposed to be mindful of everything you did, with rigid rules about everything they did. And although he railed against the Pharisees for doing that, he was also offended by the Greeks who had thrown all of those rules out - "Do what you want, let's party, let's blast!" So, here he is trying to reign in what has become a little too Greek for him. He also says that women shouldn't speak at church, and he seems to support slavery in one passage. Again, do we need to accept that? Of course not, it's ludicrous.

THE TURNING: I wonder if we can end this by talking about where Christ himself would stand on this. Christ to my knowledge doesn't say anything about homosexuality or homosexual acts. However, he does say quite a lot about judgment and whether human beings should be judging each other.

DINOVO: Christ basically says, 'judge not' . That sums it all up, 'judge not'. Love thy neighbor as yourself. Well, your neighbor in an adulterer, your neighbor is a fornicator, your neighbor is a homosexual. This is your neighbor.

Who do you think your neighbor is? Sometimes your neighbor is your enemy, this is the person you must love as yourself. Your neighbor is not the person who looks just like you and thinks just like you.

So, in light of that, what does it mean to love your neighbor? Does it mean to judge them, to harass them? To force them to change to become more like you? Absolutely not. Does it also mean to accept everything that your neighbor is doing? Not that either, because clearly, at some point, one draws the line. Jesus drew the line many times. He drew the line at stoning the adulterous woman. He made declarations in terms of justice. Certainly when you look at his ministry, it is based on justice and love.

So what is Christ calling us to do in a situation? And that's the great question for a Christian. And it is a question, it's not a pat answer, it's a real question. Every situation is a little bit different, so we can't always rush in with pat answers, the way the church is wont to do. There's all sorts of reasons. The Church has been an agent of patriarchy and that doesn't die overnight. One can quickly see, if you're a feminist at all, why you wouldn't want adultery or sleeping with homosexuals. In a patriarchy, whether in the 1st century or in Genesis, you want the bloodline to be clear, and you want property to be passed along. Follow the money. And that's where this comes from, it's an overlay over what's holy in the Bible.

THE TURNING: I saw a man on CNN the other night who is the

father of a homosexual son, and this issue had split his family in two. His son was no longer welcome in the house, he said with apparent sincerity that he loves his son, as all fathers do. However, he felt his son's homosexual lifestyle was endangering the young man's soul. He couldn't stand by as a father and look aside. What advice would you give that father in light of your reading of the Bible?

DINOVO: I always find it interesting that Christians can read the passages about not judging and then immediately do exactly that. I would immediately call the father's attention back to his own life, his own lifestyle, who he really is, and what he really did. In the same way as Jesus said, it's not even what you do, it's what you think. Okay, let's look at your thoughts now, and see if there's any sin there. And if there is any sin there, you had better pack up your stones and go home. To be biblical about it, he is judging, whether he wants to admit to it or not. And that is what all people do who hurt their own children. I mean, how horrible is that, to turn away from your own child, how unbiblical is that? So, is it loving, is it just? One would think as a community that is sitting together, praying together, that one would say no, it is neither loving nor just.

THE TURNING: From a parental perspective, we try to instill rules that our kids can live by, and many, many people look to the Bible as essentially a rule book, what behaviours are allowed or not. But what you've just said could be

interpreted as 'you know what, anything goes, just love your kids through it.'

DINOVO: Well, the thrust of the bible is anti-morality. People are always aghast at that, but that is exactly what it is. Certainly, the thrust of Jesus' ministry is against the morality of his day. He breaks just about every rule, including the commandments. He works on Sunday, and he calls for us all to stand on the side of the marginalized. And to be welcoming to everyone. Now, look at how the church is actually marginalizing people. Look at gays and lesbians, they are so marginalized, we've forced them to start their own church. And women have been marginalized for millennia. Then you've got to ask are we really being faithful, are we really being biblical? That would be the way to approach it. And then, when you look at your own children and your own life, you ask yourself: 'how am I living my life now? Am I living it with a profound and deep ethicality that is not just what ruling class morality says I should do? Am I standing up for the downtrodden? Am I welcoming the marginalized, am I welcoming everyone? Those to me are the overriding ethical demands placed upon us by Christ, and upon our children.

That doesn't mean that everything goes - absolutely not. It means you are always working for justice. There is always a struggle to be involved in, and there is always someone to be stood up for, and that shifts, of course, depending on the context.

But that's always where you should stand. In terms of your own personal ethicality and morality, that comes to play very nicely to, which is to say, 'who's hurt, who's bleeding in my life right now?' There's the call of Christ to you, to stand with the wounded. That's what's important. Sexual ethics, every kind of ethics comes from that same place. And keep in mind: we will never, never be perfect. This is the great 'joy' of original sin (laughs), we are always going to be separate from God and Christ. This is the great lie of Gnosticism, the great lie of the prophets of perfection. We're never going to be there, nobody is. How dare anyone set themselves up as holy over us, to say that you're worse than I am. That's the most unchristian attitude I can possibly imagine. If someone passes themselves off as holy and enlightened, run the other way and hold onto your wallet! They're charlatans for sure.

Links and Resources

Many of these web sites contain articles explaining how the Bible does not condemn homosexuality. Please contact us if you know of other useful resources.

[Christiangays.com is a site which affirms homosexuality as a valid alternative lifestyle supported by enlightened ACCURATE interpretation of the Bible.](#)

Equal Marriage For Same-Sex Couples : www.samesexmarriage.ca

Gay South Africa : The Bible & Homosexuality

Let The Truth Set us Free: a web site which takes a detailed look at each of the six portions of the Bible that deal with homosexuality. Finds that many of the condemnations of homosexuality have misunderstood scripture due to poor translations or

quotes have been lifted out of context. Includes a downloadable book.

<http://www.TruthSetsFree.net/bar2.html>