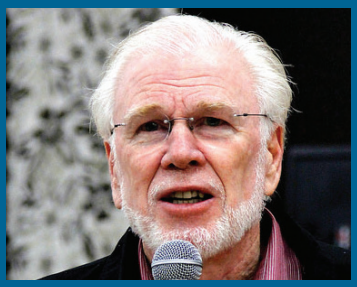
Does the Bible really say homosexuality is OK?

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On 8 March 2012, an earnest 22-year-old American named Matthew Vines delivered an address entitled The Bible and Homosexuality.[1]

He claimed his research into the biblical texts on homosexuality had led him to conclude that the Bible does not condemn loving homosexual relationships.

Vines's address spread like wildfire. Within six months, his YouTube video was viewed 350,000 times and was translated into six languages.[2] ***He is now training 50 young Christians to go into churches and persuade congregations that the Bible says "faithful gays are OK".***[3]

But is Vines's examination of the Bible passages faithful to the truth?

In a *Huffington Post* article, Vines said, "I love God. I also happen to be gay. In a better world, this would be no more interesting or noteworthy to people than loving God and happening to love, say, cheesecake.



Matthew Vines

But of course, we all know that that isn't the world we live in. And for some reason, a lot of people have a big problem with anyone who believes in God and is gay."[4]

Vines's appeal tugged strongly at the heart strings. While he quite properly raised the issue of a lack of understanding and tolerance on the part of others, many of his comments were misleading.

Vines' factual errors

MYTH Myth 1: All homosexuals want long-term, faithful relationships

Time and again, Vines talked about long-term, faithful homosexual relationships and of the longing for security and family that he claims all homosexuals feel. However, statistics show that the majority of male homosexuals do not feel this way. Only a small percentage actually want long-term partnerships.[5]

Statistics also show that promiscuity is rife among male homosexuals, with some claiming as many as 1000 different partners over a relatively short time. Others speak of four or five partners in a single night.[6] This suggests that the cry for same-sex "marriage" is more a cry for community acceptance than for long-term alliances.

MYTH Myth 2: Homosexuals are born that way

Vines also makes the assumption that homosexuality is innate. While there is evidence that circumstances can influence a person's sexual development, there is no evidence that people are born homosexual. Studies of identical twins indicate that same-sex attraction is not caused by genes, or hormones in the womb.[7] Nevertheless, regardless of the circumstances we face in life, we do make choices about how we will respond to them.

It is helpful to remember that there are many people who would love to marry and have a family, but cannot do so – because of factors such as injury, poor health, mental issues, imprisonment, disfigurement, cultural barriers and the like.

Clearly, the greatest compassion must be shown to such people, and every effort made to help them overcome those difficulties – either by bringing about change, or by assisting them to accept their situation with fortitude. Homosexuals face a similar situation.

The reality is that two people of the same sex cannot actually marry: they cannot engage in sexual intimacy in the way our bodies are created and designed. They cannot conceive a baby. They cannot create a family. This is not discrimination: it is simply the way things are. To say this is not to lack compassion. There is no law preventing people of the same sex from living together if they choose.

Vines claims that the idea of sexual orientation is a relatively recent one, although his references to history are few and selective. The reason is that the homosexual lifestyle has most commonly been seen in history as a behavioural deviation that is the result of choice. People were not identified as homosexual or heterosexual: they were simply men and women who chose to express their sexuality in a certain way.

The writings of sages like Plato make this clear. As far as I can see, even those who saw homosexual intimacy as better and more noble than heterosexual intimacy, as did Plato, still presented it as an option to be chosen rather than an inevitable destiny.

It is awful to experience loneliness and frustration... but the answer is not found in giving in to one's yearning for sexual fulfilment any more than it would be for addicts to give in to their craving.

It is an awful thing to experience loneliness and frustration. It is important to hear the heart-cry of people like Vines.

But the answer is not found in giving in to one's yearning for sexual fulfilment any more than it would be for alcoholics or addicts to give in to their craving for physical gratification. Freedom is found in breaking the pattern, not yielding to it. Genuine compassion takes this position.

Examining the scriptures

Vines points out that all the relevant biblical passages appear negative towards homosexual practice and he tries hard to reinterpret them. His approach is clear and well developed, but his exegesis is flawed. It takes a bold man to challenge the scholarship of nearly two thousand years of theological exposition. To do so, you need to uncover exceptional scholarship and research. Vines does not accomplish this.

Matthew 7:17-18

A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Vines's exegesis of this passage seems plausible, but is less than satisfactory. He argues that since a good tree brings good consequences, good teachings cannot be destructive of human dignity and self-worth. Because traditional teaching on the subject of homosexuality has been hurtful, he says it cannot be from a "good tree".

However, he assumes a too narrow view of terms like "good" and "dignity". The adjective "good" does not necessarily mean "pleasant". Sometimes what is good may be decidedly unpleasant – as in the case of painful surgery or tough discipline.

Similarly, "dignity" cannot possibly refer to sinful practices. "Good" teaching addresses sin for what it is, and the outcome is beneficial, even if the process is painful. Good teaching cannot affirm that which is fundamentally not good. If anything, this passage says exactly the opposite of the interpretation given by Vines. The fruit of teaching that homosexual practice is acceptable is fundamentally immoral. It cannot be good. And if it is immoral, to pursue it is not to enhance our dignity but to demean it. It might also be mentioned that what homosexual males actually do in the sexual area is hardly consistent with dignity.

Genesis 2:18

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

Vines is correct in saying that "it is not good for a man to be alone" – this is a quote straight from Scripture. To correctly understand this verse it is necessary to distinguish between being "alone" and being "lonely". The point of this passage is that for the human race to continue, "aloneness" will not do. This is "not good".

Children can only be conceived by the coming together of a man and a woman. Of course, marriage also addresses the problem of loneliness, but not exclusively. Loneliness can be overcome through many kinds of companionship.

Further, to leap from this point to argue that this text implies homosexual activity is to go well beyond Scripture. The solution to the question of aloneness is marriage to a person of the opposite sex. This is clearly stated in Genesis 2:18 and also in verse 24.

In principle, this is "how things were meant to be". The fact that in a fallen world, some people cannot marry or raise a family because of sickness or accident or cultural mores, does not change the principle.

Legs are designed for standing or motion. The fact that a minority of people cannot stand or walk, often for reasons beyond their control, does not alter the original intention. That's what legs are for. That some people cannot use them in this way (through injury or age, for example) does not alter that purpose. Nor does it suggest that other uses of legs (kicking someone, for example) are equal with their primary purpose.

Similarly, sexual organs are designed for both reproduction and male-female union.[8] That some people cannot or choose not to use them for this purpose does not change the original intention or allow alternative usage. Such variations or deviations from the original intention cannot be described as equal with it.

Further, Vines's argument would permit incest. Why not marry your sister or your daughter or your mother? Or why not marry several people? The logic is the same.

Genesis 19:1-11

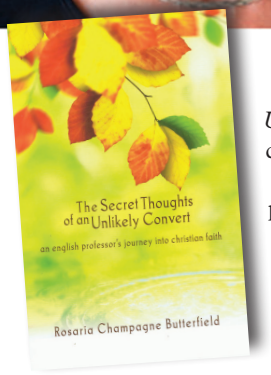
And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them."

As Vines correctly points out, there are many issues involved in this story, gang rape being one of them. There are also ancient codes of hospitality involved – codes which seem abhorrent to us today. But there is



How one lesbian CHANGED

Dr Rosaria Butterfield was a left-wing lesbian professor who despised Christians. But over time, she changed – and is now a happily married heterosexual pastor's wife.



In her book published last year, *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Rosaria outlines the challenges she faced during her journey of repentance and transformation.[14]

At 36, Rosaria had a tenured position as an English professor at Syracuse University. Her primary field was Critical Theory and her specialty was Queer Theory. She was living with her lesbian partner and was deeply involved in the LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) community.

One day, Rosaria wrote an editorial in the local newspaper criticising a Christian ministry. Pastor Ken Smith wrote a kind and probing letter in response that Rosaria could not dismiss.

Friendship with Pastor Ken and his wife, along with careful Bible reading, eventually led Rosaria to accept Christ.

At one stage, a minister told Rosaria she could honour God by living an honourable lesbian life.

"This was a very appealing prospect," Rosaria said. "But I had been reading and re-reading scripture, and there are no such marks of postmodern 'both/and' in the Bible."

She described her journey out of lesbianism as messy and difficult.

"Slowly but steadily, my feelings did start to change – feelings about myself as a woman and feelings about what sexuality really is and what it really isn't," Rosaria said.

"**When Jesus claimed me for myself, I learned that repentance unto life meant turning around—my sexuality, my career, my scholarship, my hopes, and my dreams.**"

Over time, Rosaria fell in love with a pastor. She married him, and is now a home-schooling mother of four adopted children.

Together, she and her husband try to prepare Christian students to lead lives of faith-based intellectual integrity on college campuses.

also homosexual practice.

No matter how we cut the pack, homosexual behaviour is part of this story and it is not endorsed. While not naming the offence specifically, Ezekiel 16:50 refers to "an abomination" committed in Sodom, and Jude describes their sin as "sexual immorality" and "unnatural desire" (Jude 7). Vines claims that it is widely conceded by scholars that the sin was violence rather than homosexuality, but offers no specific evidence. On the other hand, the majority of biblical scholars and virtually all English translations identify the sinful practice of the men of Sodom as including homosexual behaviour.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

These passages clearly describe homosexual behaviour as sinful. The expression is strong and it would be illogical, and indeed impossible, to reinterpret the meaning. Vines cites the Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, as resolving that the Mosaic Law is not binding on Gentile believers. However, he ignores the explicit instruction to abstain from sexual immorality – a term that includes homosexual behaviour and other sexual sins described in Leviticus 18.

Romans 1:26-27

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

This is the strongest New Testament passage against homosexual practice. Vines claims that Paul uses the word "natural" with the meaning of "according to custom". So in a different age and in a different place, it could well differ in meaning.

He draws a parallel with 1 Corinthians 11:14 which claims that nature teaches us that men have short hair. Clearly, says Vines, in this case "nature" obviously refers to accepted custom not to something inherent in humanity.

This argument seems plausible until we look at other uses of "natural" in the New Testament where it clearly refers to what is an essential and integral part of who we are.

Clear examples are to be found in Romans 2:14, Galatians 4:8, Ephesians 2:3 and 2 Peter 1:4.

In none of these texts can the term "nature" mean other than its primary meaning of the essential qualities or the native, inherent fundamental character of being.

It is of interest, by the way, that in his *Laws* (Book 8), Plato has one of his characters make a clear distinction between those actions that follow nature (e.g. marriage) and those customs that are contrary to nature (sexual immorality). Nature, he says, is clearly at variance with custom. He also compares "natural love", between a man and a woman, with "unnatural love" and describes sexual liaisons which cannot result in procreation as "unnatural".

Vines also tries to make a case that what Paul is condemning in this passage is actually idolatry and the rejection of truth that manifests itself as an excess of lust. Vines believes it is not homosexual behaviour that is sinful; it is going to excess. He says that if a person is already homosexual, then they should stay that way – it would be "unnatural" for them to engage with someone of the opposite sex and it is this inversion of roles in either direction that Paul denounces.

This is such a blatant misreading and twisting of the Word of God that it is hard to know how to address it. It is like arguing with someone who maintains that the moon is made of cheese.

Isaiah 5:20 seems relevant. One can only come back to the plain and obvious meaning of the original text: it is sinful to exchange natural desires (physical intimacy with someone of the opposite sex) for unnatural desires (physical intimacy with people of the same sex).

Vines also tries to argue that it is not life-long faithful partnerships that Paul denounces in this passage but other forms of same-sex behaviour that he sees as an expression of gluttony. Historically, this cannot be established. Some ancient writings of the period describe homosexual behaviour as being generally similar to that which same-sex activists describe today.[9]

In reality, as we have noted, the majority of contemporary homosexual men are not in long-term relationships and generally don't want to be. Evidently for them it is not companionship they seek, but sexual pleasure.

This is where much of the homosexual propaganda which confronts us today is so difficult to deal with, because it is essentially dishonest. The plea for same-sex "marriage", for example, is primarily a plea for acceptance and respectability, not for marriage itself.

Matthew 19:1-12

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?"

This is a passage that Vines does not quote. It is agreed that it makes no reference to homosexual practice: ironically, this is precisely why it should be quoted. It represents the teaching of Jesus on marriage.

It is sometimes claimed that Jesus did not mention homosexual practice. The truth is that Jesus *did* say something about homosexuality: he condemned it. There is no doubt that Jewish listeners, from their knowledge of the Old Testament, would have understood homosexual practice to be included in the meaning of the New Testament Greek word *porneia* found in Matthew 15:19 and Mark 7: 21, where Jesus condemns the evil things which come out of a person, making them unclean. Jesus did not need to spell it out.

The Greek word *porneia* (or *porneiai*, plural) is translated "fornications" in the King James Bible and "sexual immorality" in some other versions. It means "illicit sexual intercourse" and includes adultery, fornication, incest, homosexuality, lesbianism and bestiality, all of which are forbidden in Old Testament law.

In Matthew 19:1-12 where Jesus was quizzed about marriage, he only referred to male and female. If he thought that homosexual practice was all right, why did he not say so at this point? In reality, the only sexual relationship Jesus approved or commended is marriage between a man and a woman. This concept, he said, was laid down at the very beginning of creation. This is a passage that tells us how things are supposed to be. That is plainly marriage between a man and a woman.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The phrase "men who practise homosexuality" in this passage from the English Standard Version is actually a translation of two separate terms used by Paul. The first is the plural form of *malakos*. Vines argues that this term has a wider meaning than just homosexuality. This is true. Its primary meaning is "soft" or "effeminate". But this does not mean it excludes male homosexuals.

One scholar defines *malakos* as a technical term for the passive partner in homosexual relations.[10] It is rendered variously by translators as "catamites" (i.e. pederasts, *Jerusalem Bible*), "effeminate" (KJV, ASV)

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and "male prostitutes" (NIV, NRSV). Barnes suggests it refers to "those who are given up to wantonness and sensual pleasures, or who are kept to be prostituted to others". The second term *arsenokoites* is derived from the words for "man" (*arsen*) and "bed" (*koite*). Vines correctly points out that etymology does not always explain the current meaning of a term, but in this case it does. The reference is to same-sex engagement, to men who share their bed.

Vines goes on to argue that neither of these terms applies to homosexual practice as it is understood today. He says it was only in 1946 that the first English translation of the Bible suggested that they do. Here again, he is arguing against historical evidence, the context and the widespread understanding of biblical scholars.

Nearly 500 years ago, in his pioneer 1526 translation, William Tyndale translated *arsenokoites* as "abusers of themselves with mankind". This seems vague in the context of our current generation where we tend to be more explicit on these issues, but it does reflect the language of his day where it refers to homosexual practice. The word "abuse" was used in 1538 to refer to "improper use or perversion".[11]

Liddell and Scott's 1872 lexicon defines *arsenokoites* as applying to one who practises "unnatural offences", a nineteenth century term for same-sex interaction. Barnes's 19th Century *Notes on the New Testament* define the term as referring to "pæderastæ or sodomites". The 1881 *Revised Version* of the Bible employs the phrase "abusers of themselves with men".

Some contemporary translations use terms like "homosexual offenders" (NIV), "men who practise homosexuality" (ESV), "makes a wrong use of men" (Basic English) or "sodomites" (NRSV). Others simply combine both the nouns used by Paul with phrases such as "homosexuals" (God's Word, ISV) or "men who have sex with men" (NIV, 2010).

The evidence is compelling that the Bible's reference here is to homosexual sin. The same comment can be applied to 1 Timothy 1:10, where *arsenokoites* is employed in the same way. Virtually every Bible translation of this text agrees, including the New International Reader's Version that renders it "those who have a twisted view of sex".

It is the following verse (11) that clinches the matter.

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.[12]

If the ten representative groups listed in the previous two verses are not acting wrongly, then this verse is meaningless, for it declares unequivocally that the Corinthians, who used to practise such things, were washed, sanctified and justified from them.

How can we be washed, sanctified and justified of behaviour that is not sinful? To argue otherwise is to make a mockery of the Word of God.

There is one more point to make on this passage – probably the most important of all. Paul's focus is actually not on the seriousness of the sin but on the greatness of the grace that delivers us from that sin. This is the crux of the matter.

In the name of Christ and by the power of the Spirit it is possible to be set free. Our task is not to denounce sin and condemn the sinner, but to declare the liberation that is possible through Christ. This is the message Jesus came to bring[13] and it is the message God's people need to deliver.

We can be set free and cleansed from any sin, including homosexual practice. It is a matter for regret that Christians have too often missed this and have come across as judgemental and self-righteous.

1 Corinthians 7:9

But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Vines argues that if Paul suggested that marriage was an effective solution for dealing with sexual desire, why shouldn't the same argument apply to homosexuals? Again, this sounds plausible. But if so, why doesn't Paul say so? In none of his references to marriage is there even a hint of homosexual relationships.

Everyone has desires of one kind or another, and it is right and proper for these desires to be fulfilled – but only in a lawful manner. If we are hungry, it is right to eat; but it is not right to steal in order to eat. If we need clothes it is right to obtain them, but not to rob someone else. And if we are lonely and unfulfilled, it is right to find fulfilment through marriage – but not through rape, adultery or homosexual engagement.

It might be argued in return that if there is a choice between starving and stealing, the latter might be acceptable. This is a fair point, given that starving will ultimately be fatal. But this is not relevant to sexual frustration – which will not result in death, no matter how much it feels that way.

Conclusion

Matthew Vines's talk is clearly a cry for understanding and approval, a cry that cannot be ignored. One cannot but feel sympathy for him and the community for which he speaks.

But the biblical issues cannot be ignored either. They cannot be swept under the carpet or even worse, twisted into new meanings.

Even so, to ignore the pain and sense of rejection felt by homosexuals is unacceptable. Somehow the old adage of "hate the sin but love the sinner" has to be demonstrated convincingly in our time. "Neither do I condemn you" and "Go and sin no more" stand irreversibly together.

Jesus' commission in Luke 4:18 provides a good model. He came to set people free. Through him there is liberation. There is always hope in every situation of victory through Christ.

Note: *This paper is not a discussion of homosexuality in general. It is restricted to discussing the issues raised by Matthew Vines.*

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