

Written in the past,
calling to the present
a positive approach to text and context

Same-Sex Relationships: 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy

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Abstract

There are two passages from the New Testament that are often quoted as proof that you cannot be gay and Christian: 1 Corinthians 6.9–10 and 1 Timothy 1.9–10. The New International Version of the former says “men who have sex with men ... will [not] inherit the kingdom of God.” If the understanding of these passages was as simple as a superficial reading suggests, then the gay Christian movement would never have started. However, their messages is more equivocal, and there are many conflicting translations.

It can be shown that the key words in these passages, *malakos* and *arsenokoites*, are not about sex between men, and the latter can even be connected to sex between a husband and wife.

By considering the wider Christian context of these passages, in particular what Christ said about inheriting the Kingdom of God, and allowing this context to guide our lives we can be confident that we have not broken the prohibitions in these passages, whatever they mean.

I WANT to begin with an anecdote, although I should admit that, for reasons of brevity, this is actually an amalgam of two separate anecdotes. A couple of years ago, Michael, who was my boyfriend at the time, was round in my flat. He was taken ill, and collapsed, and I called an ambulance. In the back of the ambulance Michael was not providing me with much conversation—one of his symptoms was that he could not speak—and so to pass the time on the journey to the hospital, I looked at some of the equipment in the ambulance, which was particularly interesting to me with my technical background. Michael, who has made a full recovery and is now my husband, did tell me off when he got the power of speech back. I was told that I was a heartless boyfriend.

Now was that a fair assessment? That is not the point. The point is that if you are a native English speaker (and possibly if you are not) you understand what the phrase ‘heartless boyfriend’ means. ‘Heartless’ does not mean ‘lacking a literal heart’, and a ‘boyfriend’ is not someone who is a boy and a friend. Both of these words have meaning that you cannot deduce from looking at their constituent parts. Their meaning, like all words, comes from how they are used.

Anyway, onto our main topic. What do 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy say about same-sex relationships? My ultimate conclusion, by the way, is that for this question, the key parts of these books are untranslatable, but the teaching of Christ himself gives us the information to see that they do not oppose Christian same-sex relationships.

There are two passages from these books that are often quoted as proof that you cannot be gay and Christian. The first is 1 Corinthians 6.9–10:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (NIV)

The New International Version (NIV) says, in a footnote, ‘The words men who have sex with men translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.’ Those words are *malakos* and *arsenokoites*. The second word appears only one other time in the Bible, and that is in 1 Timothy 1.9–10:

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. (NIV)

Here *arsenokoites* is translated as ‘those practicing homosexuality’.

At first glance, it does look like these two passages are a condemnation of all same-sex relationships, or at the very least a condemnation of all male same-sex relationships. If that were the case then Accepting Sexuality could simply pack up its stuff and go home. There could be no debate, no discussion. Of course, these passages only look that way at first glance. When you look at them

more closely, their message is much more equivocal.¹ Let's look at 1 Corinthians 6.9–10 in Today's New International Version:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (TNIV)

In this translation, *malakos* is translated as 'male prostitutes' and *arsenokoites* as 'practicing homosexuals'. Those are not the same as 'men who have sex with men'. In different English translations, *malakos* is translated as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Translations of *malakos* in English translations of the Bible

<i>Translation</i>	<i>Version</i>
Effeminate	King James Version (1611), New American Standard Version (1963), Revised Version (1884)
Male prostitutes	Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004), New Living Translation (1996), New Revised Standard Version (1990)
Pervert	Contemporary English Version (1995)
Self-indulgent	New Jerusalem Bible (1985)

Which of these translations ought we to follow? If I go to great pains to avoid effeminacy, if I never work as a prostitute, if I avoid all forms of behaviour that could be described as perversion, but I take an extra slice of chocolate cake and am therefore self-indulgent, does that mean I am now a *malakos* and thus excluded from the Kingdom of God? You may think I am being facetious, but in first century Greek, *malakos* was actually a somewhat vague term which really did mean something like self-indulgent.

There is a range of translations for *arsenokoites* as well, although that is not quite as broad. The 1973 New International Version translates it as 'homosexual offenders', while the Contemporary English Version translates it as someone who 'behaves like a homosexual'. It really is not clear what a homosexual offender is and what range of behaviours it covers, and behaving like a homosexual is an equally vague term that does not quite overlap with it.

Some translations, like the current NIV, combine *malakos* and *arsenokoites* into one term. Again there is a range of incompatible translations as shown in Table 1.2.

¹ Martin, (1996)

Table 1.2 Translations of *malakos* and *arsenokoites* as one term in English translations of the Bible

<i>Translation</i>	<i>Version</i>
Those who participate in homosexuality	Amplified Bible (1958)
Men who practice homosexuality	English Standard Version (2001)
Homosexual perverts	Good News Bible, 2nd edn (1994)
Sexual pervert[s]	Revised English Bible (1989), Revised Standard Version, 2nd edn (1971)

A man may read the Amplified Bible, the English Standard Version, and the Good News Bible and conclude that he may have perverted sex with his wife—whatever perverted means—and not lose his place in the Kingdom of God. Another man may read the Good News Bible, the Revised English Bible, and the second edition of the Revised Standard Version and conclude that he may have non-perverted sex with his husband—again, whatever perverted means—and not lose his place in the Kingdom of God. Who is right? Which translations should a Christian follow? Perhaps we should behave in such a way that we follow all the restrictions placed on us by all the translations, just to be safe?²

What does *malakos* mean? What does *arsenokoites* mean?

Arsenokoites

Many Christians, when faced with difficult-to-translate words look at the word itself and try to deduce the meaning from the ‘roots’ or etymology of the word. For *arsenokoites* the argument from William Petersen is fairly typical:

Broken into its roots, [*arsenokoites*] literally translates as “the ones (masc.) who lie/sleep with men”, and ... that is the translation I would espouse.³

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that. Remember that I said that ‘heartless’ does not mean ‘lacking a literal heart’ and ‘boyfriend’ does not mean someone who is a boy and a friend? You cannot look at

² For a wide range of different and contrasting translations of 1 Cor. 6.9–10 and 1 Tim. 1.9–10, see “Translations of *arsenokoites* and *malakos*”, <<http://mcfarlandcampbell.co.uk/translations-of-arsenokoites-and-malakos/>>

³ Petersen (1986)

the component parts of a word and come up with a meaning that way. This mistake is so common that it has its own name: it is called the etymological fallacy.⁴

How do you deduce the meaning of a word then? The only reliable way to do this is to look at the way the word is used in as many different contexts as we can.

First of all, I want to consider whether *arsenokoites* and *malakos* are a pair of words. We can tell straight away that they are not. *Arsenokoites* is used in 1 Corinthians 6.9–10, and it is used right next to *malakos*. However, in 1 Timothy 1, *arsenokoites* is used and *malakos* is absent. If one word means the ‘active’ partner and the other means the ‘passive’ as some translations say,⁵ then we would expect that they are used together.

In the Bible, we do not really have enough context to deduce what *arsenokoites* means. It is used just twice, and both times it is in a list of sins of many different types. We have to look at how it is used in other Greek writing from around that time. *Arsenokoites* is used, in different forms, in roughly seventy to eighty extant documents, dating from the first century to the twelfth.⁶ Unfortunately, most of them are not particularly useful for deducing what the word means because they simply do not provide enough context. There is, however, one document which uses the word in such a way to make it clear that *arsenokoites* is not about sex between men. That document is the Penitential of John the Faster, who died in 595 AD.

Likewise, one must enquire about *arsenokoitia*, of which there are three varieties. For is is one thing to get it from someone ... another to do it to someone else... another to do it to someone and have it done to you...

In fact many men even commit the sin of *arsenokoitia* with their own wives.⁷

That is something that should worry every Christian heterosexual couple. It is possible that a man and a woman can commit this sin in the context of their marriage. Being in a monogamous, faithful, heterosexual marriage does not mean that you have not committed the sin of *arsenokoitia*. If you use 1 Corinthians 6.9–10 and 1 Timothy 1.10 to exclude gay people from your church, then you should be using these verses to exclude straight people too.

I do not want to overstate the case here. John the Faster lived a few hundred years after 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy were written. The meaning of words can and does change with time, but if we confine ourselves to extant documents from the first and second centuries, we do not have

⁴ Lyons (1977) p.244

⁵ As mentioned, the current NIV, in the footnote to 1 Corinthians 6.9 says ‘The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts’. In the English Standard Version the footnote says ‘The two Greek terms translated by this phrase refer to the passive and active partners in consensual homosexual acts.’

⁶ Townsley (2010)

⁷ Boswell, (1981) p.364

enough evidence to do anything other than guess what *arsenokoites* means.⁸

That is something that should worry every Christian, regardless of their sexual orientation or relationship status. *Arsenokoites* will not inherit the kingdom of God and nobody knows what *arsenokoites* means. You could be committing that sin right now, without even knowing it.

Malakos

What about *malakos*? What does it mean? Fortunately, this is an easier question to answer. *Malakos* literally means ‘soft’, and metaphorically means ‘effeminate’, or ‘morally weak’. It is not used to mean the ‘passive’ partner in sex between men. There was actually another Greek word—*kinaedos*—that meant that.⁹

A prohibition against effeminacy puts us in a difficult position. What does it mean to be effeminate? If we interpret *malakos* in the wider sense of ‘morally weak’ that just makes the problem worse. What does ‘morally weak’ mean? To be sure, connecting *malakos* with same-sex relationships has the advantage of being focused and precise, but there is not any evidence to say that it is accurate.

The Christian Approach

So far this discussion has been rather mechanical. I have been talking about the meanings of these words as though they came from any ancient source. But they did not. They came from the Bible. We can approach these passages, not as academic linguists, but as Christians.¹⁰

Consider the following words: fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, abusers of themselves with mankind, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, extortioners, uncleanness, lasciviousness, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, whoremongers.

How many of you can honestly say that you understand every one of these terms? What is ‘uncleanness’ for a follower of Christ? What is ‘variance’?

Why should we care?

These words are some of the most terrifying in the Bible. Why? The answer lies in two quotes, both from Paul’s letters: 1 Corinthians 6.9–10 and Galatians 5.19–21:

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves

⁸ It is tempting to look at the Penitential of John the Faster and deduce the specific sexual act that *arsenokoites* refers to. However, you also have to remember that the Greeks had a huge sexual vocabulary, and *arsenokoites* is a very rare word. Why would this word be used for a common act when there were other words that could be used? This is also something we should consider when thinking about the ‘strange flesh’ in Jude 7. Is that phrase used to refer to same-sex relationships anywhere else in first century Greek? If not, why would we think it is here?

⁹ Martin (1996)

¹⁰ See my exhortation The Most Frightening Words in the Bible, <http://mcfarlandcampbell.co.uk/2012/10/21/the-most-frightening-words-in-the-bible/>

with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6.9–10, KJV)

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5.19–21, KJV)

These words are terrifying because those are the things which we can do that will exclude us from the kingdom of God. It is not just *malakos* and *arsenokoites* in those lists. An awful lot of those terms are vague and unclear.

Inheriting the kingdom of God. That is the key to understanding what *arsenokoites* and *malakos* and the rest mean. Inheriting and not inheriting are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. You either inherit the kingdom of God or you do not. What does the Bible say about those who will inherit the Kingdom?

Then [Jesus] will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. ... Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' (Matthew 25.34-45, NIV)

In this description of judgement, Jesus looks at the Christian love expressed, one human being to another. It is these loving behaviours that Christ wants. The sex of the person to whom you are married, the sex of your partner, is not an issue.

I think it is reasonable to assume that the writers of the Epistles and Jesus are singing from the same hymn sheet. What does Christ say will exclude us from the Kingdom? Failure to love our neighbour as ourselves. What do the Epistles say will exclude us from the Kingdom? They list specific things, but those specific things must be mere aspects of what Christ says will exclude us. Both *arsenokoites* and *malakos* are difficult terms to translate. I would go as far as saying *arsenokoites* is impossible to translate. We do not have to worry about that. We do not have to base our theology or our lives on them. We do not have to live in fear of accidentally sinning because we depended on the wrong translation, and we do not have to exclude people from our churches because some translators say these words should be translated in a particular way. If we look at the wider context of Christian teaching in the Bible and guide our lives according to the behaviours that Christ himself

said would lead to us inheriting the kingdom of God, then we can be confident that we have not broken the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, whatever they may mean.

Appendix 1

The Septuagint and Arsenokoites

The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Bible and some related texts into Greek, begun in the late 3rd century BC. Some scholars argue that the Septuagint translations of Leviticus 18.22 and Leviticus 20.13 contain the roots of *arsenokoites* and therefore the meaning of the word.¹¹

In the Septuagint

*kai meta **arsenos** ou koimēthēsē **koitēn** gunaikos bdelugma gar estin* (Lev. 18.22, emphasis mine)

*kai os an koimēthē meta **arsenos koitēn** gunaikos bedelugma epoiēsan amphotoi thanatousthōsan enochoi eisin* (Lev. 20.13, emphasis mine)

In the NIV

Do not have sexual relations with a man as one with a woman that is detestable (Lev. 18.22, NIV)

If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (Lev. 20.13, NIV)

The trouble with that position is that it is not clear what the underlying Hebrew idiom in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 means,¹² and we are trying to understand an opaque 2000-year-old Greek idiom by using an opaque Hebrew idiom that is about 4000 years old.

¹¹ Wright, (1984)

¹² e.g., Boyarin (1994); Olyan (1994); and Walsh (2001)

Further Reading

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