

What does Leviticus teach about sexuality, and how should we live in response?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

Some laws in Leviticus are important to all of us. The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18), for example, was essential to Jesus and remains so for us. On some others we may not agree. One example would be, “You (a man) shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination” (18:22). (An “abomination” was an act that violated the categories that Leviticus used to make sense of the world, an impurity; for example, since bleeding made a woman impure, a man who had intercourse with a menstruating woman committed an abomination – 18:19, 24-30.)

There are many laws in Leviticus that practically no Presbyterian follows. The law that comes immediately after the command to love your neighbor forbids wearing clothing that mixes different kinds of material, such as a shirt made of cotton and polyester (19:19). Another law prohibits clipping one’s beard at the edges (19:27). Others prohibit crossbreeding animals (19:19 – leaving unclear what constitutes a “breed”), eating meat with blood in it (17:10-13), eating pork or lobster (11:7, 10-12), ordaining anyone who can’t walk or has poor eyesight (21:17-20), and much more that we would probably regard as irrelevant or contrary to an ethical life. Some might appear positively abhorrent. Leviticus imposes the death penalty on children who dishonor their parents (20:9). And on a man lying with another male, in the only other verse in Leviticus on the subject: “they both shall be put to death” (20:13).

On what basis do we decide to obey one verse in Leviticus and not another? Selecting only the verses we agree with seems arbitrary. Some have suggested that we should keep laws in Leviticus that are reaffirmed in the New Testament. But the church does not apply this standard consistently. In Acts 15, early church leaders waive most of

the Jewish dietary restrictions for Gentile Christians, but they agree that Gentiles should not eat any meat with blood. This law from the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:4) and from Leviticus is reaffirmed in the New Testament, but we don't believe it is necessary for holiness

Even if we accepted all of the Levitical prohibitions reaffirmed in the New Testament, they would not include the prohibition of same-sex love. Jesus makes no mention of same-sex relations, and Paul's apparent censure of homosexuality in Romans 1 differs significantly from the prohibition in Leviticus. Paul writes about same-sex relations among Gentile men and women. But the Levitical prohibition of same-sex relations applies only to Israelites, only to males, and only to the land of Canaan. Whatever Paul intends, he does not mean to reaffirm a few favorite passages of the law in Leviticus. This should come as no surprise: Paul's entire life was turned upside down by the realization that God's new covenant does not depend on the laws of the Torah, even though as a Jew he continued to honor them.

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The purity laws in Leviticus were developed out of the priestly account of creation in Genesis 1 and the categories that unfold there, beginning with the disposition of blood and the unqualified command to procreate. (For example, Leviticus does not mention lesbianism because it involves no waste of male "seed.") Other than the eating of blood as described in Acts, however, Paul rejects the notion that the Mosaic food restrictions derived from the blood taboo apply to Gentiles, and he like Jesus urges celibacy, not procreation. The capstone of both creation and the laws of the Mosaic covenant in Leviticus is the Sabbath. But Jesus subordinated even this treasured mark of holiness to doing good.

Presbyterian Christians affirm Jesus' emphasis in our Book of Order. "Truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'" Like Jesus and Paul, this Historic Principle of Church Order (G-1.0304) takes the measure of holiness to be goodness defined by love of neighbor, not the structural abstractions of Leviticus. Such abstractions – male vs. female (what about the intersexed?), same vs. different (what about "interracial" marriage and offspring?), saved semen vs. lost semen (is shared sexual pleasure not a mark of a strong marriage?), with blood vs. without blood (should women be defined by

menstruation?) – will not serve a church committed to holiness defined by love of neighbor. Calvin called holiness “our advance in piety through the course of our life.” Holiness is to be gauged by the ethics of love and justice, not by categories and patterns tied to a tabernacle, altar, blood sacrifice, temple, city, and holy land that have ceased to define the Christian life.

The law against same-sex love fails the test of holiness laid down by our church’s Constitution. It arises not out of response to God’s command to love your neighbor as yourself, but out of a need to organize the world into categories of clean and unclean. The belief system that categorizes people on the basis of an identification of sex and gender, exploiting the binary nature of sex to provide a spurious moral righteousness, is still dominant among us. Not only has the church continued to embrace this aspect of the dominant culture’s modern-day moral pollution code, but we have remained its chief advocate. The church’s appeal to purity and pollution categories to support the continued disparagement of same-sex love serves the same purposes that anthropologist Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*) described for pollution thinking in any culture. Pollution

beliefs function culturally to uphold a moral convention in the midst of moral uncertainty or a perceived shortage of moral indignation.

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Intolerance or moral uncertainty and disagreement may provide a cultural excuse for unfair discrimination, but it scarcely represents fidelity to the Lord who triumphs over all barriers of status, intolerance, and inequity. As the earliest church avowed, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, not male and female – for all are one in

Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). The church has betrayed this baptismal ideal many times over, but it remains the ideal.