It is commonly argued that the Bible condemns sexual “perversion” such as gay or lesbian sex. In earlier posts I discussed the relevant passages of the Old Testament, to show that they simply cannot be used in these modern debates, since their very understandings of the phenomena are completely at odds with what people think today (including, most emphatically, the people who appeal to those passages in support of their views). See, for example: https://ehrmanblog.org/are-same-sex-relations-condemned-in-the-old-testament/?highlight=homosexual

I should stress there are lots of other activities that are condemned in the Bible all over the map, and these are never a particular emphasis of modern ethical discussion, whether in Christian circles or in society at large. You may be able to deprive gays and lesbians of their civil rights or deny them the ability to serve in the church, based on a couple of passages (almost always misinterpreted) scattered here and there throughout the very large Bible; but what about doing the same for people who are greedy, who get angry, who disobey their parents, who eat or drink too much, who have had sex with someone they weren’t married to, or who are rich? Do you want to condemn all of them to hell as well? Throw them in jail? Keep them out of public view? Not let them talk to your children? Deprive them of their rights? But these are problems condemned forcefully and repeatedly in the Bible, over and over again.

When I worked in churches back in my 20s, I knew all sorts of people who were fabulously rich, and completely self-indulgent, and willing to lie at the drop of a hat, who didn’t care a fig for the impoverished souls living within a mile of them, who were regularly asked to serve as leaders of their church boards, and who, in that role, condemned “homosexuals” as going straight to eternal torment. What’s wrong with this picture?

Most people with that view appeal not only to the Old Testament passages I’ve discussed, but especially passages in the New Testament. But again, there’s actually not much to go on here. In a later post I’ll be arguing that the New Testament has no conception at all of sexual orientation, any more than it had a conception of quantum physics. Human knowledge has advanced a lot since the first century.

It’s true, the authors did know that sometimes men had sex with men and women with women. But they had no conception at all that it had anything to do with something we today would call “orientation” that could explain sexual desire. They saw something they weren’t used to and (in at least one passage) (in fact, in only one passage) condemned it as unnatural. The same way they condemned women with short hair as unnatural. Literally, the same way. Both were unnatural. Should we deprive women with short hair their civil rights or keep them off church boards and the PTA?

I’ll get to that later, when I get around to talking about Romans 1.

The easiest passages for people opposed to “homosexuality” or “homosexuals” to appeal to are the passages that, in some English translations, actually use the term. In the entire New Testament, there are two: 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The seemingly clearest instance is the former. Here it is in the New American Standard Bible translation:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.
The 1 Timothy passages uses the same term, to say that the law opposes it, just as it does people who lie and don’t keep their oaths.

There are two very big problems with using these passages to make wide-sweeping claims about same-sex relations either in the church or in society at large, on the grounds that God condemns it and will send those who engage in it to hell. The first is obvious and the second is almost entirely unknown to the reading public at large.

The obvious problem is that ...

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