



ἀρσενοκοίτης • arsenokoites

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

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In this opening worship series in 2020, which we're calling, *My, How the Bible has Changed*, we are looking at how our English translation is, at times, insufficient in reflecting the intent of the Biblical text. The Bible was written in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek, languages that have nuanced differences, which our modern languages often fail to reflect. Many of the changes that exist between the *intent* of the ancient languages and the *effect* of the modern English are not uninformed or malicious, we often just don't have the right verbiage to accurately reflect the ancient text's focus. And yet, other outcomes of the English translation have been made maliciously, like with the word *doulos*, which we looked at two weeks ago. *Doulos*, translated rightly as "slave," was used to uphold the institution of American slavery – clearly a move by the privileged and powerful to maintain their privilege and power.

Today's word, *arsenokoites* (are-sin-ō-coy-tace), is another challenging word that has become weaponized in the church. In some ways, we can blame this one word for the pending division in the United Methodist Church. This word is found in just two places in the New Testament text, but has been the root of millions of dollars in legal and conference expenses over the past 40 years, and has taken up more than its fair share of time in local church and general church conversations.

The word has many different translations in the English language, but the translation that has caused the most division since it first showed up in an English translation in 1946, is the word "homosexual." ... Yes, the word "homosexual" was not used in any Bible translation for the word *arsenokoites* until the Revised Standard Version first printed it in 1946. Just 26 years later, in 1972, the United Methodist Church added into its *Book of Discipline* the line, "Homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." We have been in a global United Methodist debate over this language, and the rules and policies that stem from it, ever since.

As we look at this word, I want to name up front that I know this is a sensitive subject. I understand that there are some things people really don't enjoy discussing at church – or in public – or often in their own personal relationships. Politics, sex, and money are at the top of that list. Yet, our global church of over 12 million members is about to split over this one word, so I think it bears enough weight to be considered in the midst of discerning God's will for us as a people of faith in this new decade.

It should also be named that there is *no* scholarly consensus on the meaning of this word. There are faithful, intelligent, Biblically literate, God-fearing and God-loving people who, for all the time they have spent studying the Biblical text in its ancient form, cannot come to an agreement on the exact

meaning of this word. This is a word that, for all we can discern based on context and usage, is almost always translated through the lens of one's personal beliefs that exist outside of their Biblical study.

As a quick road map for this morning, as we look at the word *arsenokoites*, we're going to start by looking at the etymology and context as it is used in Paul, and then widen our scope to see how it has been translated throughout the past 2,000 years. Then, we're going to widen the context of Paul's letter to the greater vision of the Biblical text to see how we might best understand Paul's purpose, and seek to discern how we might best read this text in our desire to be faithful as people devoted to Christ today.

The word *arsenokoites* is first and foremost a difficult word to translate because it is a word Paul seems to have made up. The only two uses of the word in the whole of the Bible are found in our text in 1 Corinthians 6, and in 1 Timothy 1, both letters attributed to Paul.

Here in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul is making an argument about why the members of the early church shouldn't be reliant upon the civil courts to solve personal disputes. It's obvious this has been an issue in the church, and Paul says plain and clear in verse 5, "I say this to shame you." He's disappointed that they have been relying on "unbelievers" – that is, the judges of the Roman court system – to solve their inter-personal issues. Paul knows that the Roman court system is unjust, and its well documented that the system gave privilege to the wealthy who could afford the legal costs to take others to court. Paul had no faith the Roman court system could provide a just and faithful resolution. So he chastises the church for relying on court rulings, "Is there not one of you that is wise enough to decide between one believer and another?" Paul believes this is in bad form, and, with his priority focus on the health of the church, he likely believes that going to the Roman courts is a bad look for the church. He says in verses 7 and 8, "It would be better to suffer economic injustice than to seek legal restitution, better to be wronged than to do wrong."<sup>i</sup>

In verses 9-11, in the midst of making this claim about how poor a decision it is to utilize the Roman courts, Paul inserts an eschatological perspective – that is, he frames his argument in an end-times assessment. Paul begins, "Do you not know that people who do wrong will not inherit the kingdom of God?" ... In the context of this section of Paul's letter, Paul is making clear that the issues they are taking to court are unimportant in the grander scheme. However, there are eternal-consequence issues that are important, and here are some of those issues. This is not an exhaustive list, but seems to be a focus of Paul in 1 Corinthians. The majority of this list is a repeat from what Paul offered just a chapter prior, in 5:11. This list includes fornicators, idolaters, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and robbers. To this list, Paul adds a few more. The first two additions are just other ways to say what he has already said: adulterers and thieves (these are just synonyms for fornicators and robbers).

Then Paul adds two more, which aren't found in chapter 5. Our NRSV translates these two words as "male prostitutes" and "sodomites." The King James Version translates them as, "the effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind." The New International Version translates them as, "male prostitutes" and "those who practice homosexuality." The Common English Bible translates them as a singular concept, writing "both participants in same-sex intercourse." The range of English interpretations run far and wide.

The two Greek words are *malakos* and *arsenokoites*. They are rare finds in Greco-Roman literature. So rare, in fact, that it is believed that Paul made up the word *arsenokoites*, if not also *malakos*. In the context of Paul's list of sexual wrongdoings, what clues do we have to help us understand Paul's intent, and how we might faithfully understand these words in their original Greek context, as instructive words to the church of Corinth?

*Malakos* is a Greek word that stems from a root word meaning "soft." With its troubling and generalizing stereotype, this is why the King James translates the word as "the effeminate." However, along with the problematic generalization of saying that someone who is *effeminate* is "soft," an equal concern here is that Paul's list is not describing a person's characteristics, he's listing a person's abusive actions. The King James seems to miss this mark, not only by correlating "soft" with *effeminate*, but more so because a person being effeminate has nothing to do with their sexual practice, much less an abusive sexual practice. So how does being "soft" relate to an abusive sexual action? A couple suggestions are that Paul is referring to "young boys who were the passive partners in pederastic relationships."<sup>ii</sup> Paul has spoken multiple times about how unfaithful it is to abuse one's power, and this word *malakos* could be picking up on the abuse of power in pederasty. Another possibility is that one who is "soft" has no boundaries, such that the abusive action Paul is referring to is "unbridled lust." In the context of Paul's focus here, it seems *malakos* is focused on an unhealthy sexual addiction – and that might lead you to a number of different English words, such as "male prostitutes," which we see both in the NRSV and NIV.

*Arsenokoites* is also a difficult word to translate, because it is so rare in its ancient usage. From an etymological perspective, this is a word that is formed from two Greek words: *arsen*, meaning "man," and *koites*, meaning "bed." So, quite literally, the word means "man bed." In a general sense, every translation of the word centers around the idea of a man being abusive in bed – being sexually abusive. Again, in context, Paul is talking about abusive *acts* – not personal characteristics – so the question we must ask in translation is, what kind of abusive acts of sexuality is Paul saying men shouldn't engage in? In this question, you can begin to see that your personal beliefs about what is sexually abusive and what is not affects your translation of the word. Whatever word you choose to use, it should center around Paul's focus on an abuse of sexuality.

Given that personal beliefs can make a difference, let's take a look: how has this word been translated throughout the history of Christianity? What word choices has our tradition chosen to use?

As I mentioned earlier, the word "homosexual" was not used in a Biblical translation until the Revised Standard Version first printed it in 1946. In more recent editions of the RSV, they have changed the word, and now use the phrase "sexual perverts." Prior to 1946, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, we see the King James Version using the phrase, "abusers of themselves with mankind." An appropriate translation.

If we back up even further, we find that in non-English translations, the focus was not on same-gender sexual relations or abuse in general, but on pederasty. In the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the Latin lexicon says that the word *arsenokoites* was equivalent to the word *paedico*, which is a "child abuser."<sup>iii</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup>

Century, the German Bible translated the word in the same way, as *knabenschander* – literally a “boy molester,” or a “pederast.” And perhaps that makes sense if you were to take these two words *malakos* and *arsenokoites* in tandem. It was wrong to be the “soft” one who engaged liberally in sexual acts, giving oneself at all costs to sexual abuse. It was also wrong to take the position of power, or abuser, as a “pederast,” who sexually forced himself among one who had no control, or no power.

Given the wide range of possibilities, and the differences in its historical use, it would be helpful for us to widen the scope of Paul’s letters to understand the greater context of the Biblical witness.

In the full frame of the Biblical text, it’s worth asking, what does God desire for creation? In its ultimate context, how might we read Paul’s letter to the church of Corinth as supporting the greater Biblical witness? I like how Rev. Steve Harper, frames this question. Rev. Harper is a retired United Methodist pastor, who taught Spiritual Formation and Wesley Studies for over 30 years at Asbury Theological Seminary. He says that the study of Bible should be like putting together a puzzle. If you’re like me, when you’re working on a puzzle, you pick up a piece of the puzzle, you look at the box top to see how and where your piece fits into the greater picture, and then you put the piece it in its place. Rev. Harper should do the same with the Biblical text – looking at any one piece in the perspective of how it fits in with the whole of the Biblical witness. So what does the greater witness of the Bible say?

The greater witness of the Biblical text – from God’s work in creation, to God’s formation of covenant, to God’s incarnational witness in Christ, to God’s establishment of the church, to the ultimate fulfilment of God’s will in the kingdom of Heaven to come – the greater witness of the Biblical text is one that invites us into the ideal of *shalom*, which we discussed last week. The intention and desire of God is that we live in right relationship with God, placing God’s will at the center of our desire and belief. This is our prayer each week, as taught by Christ: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

To this end, we look at how the Biblical text proclaims that we are each made first in the image of God, and second, in the way God wanted us to be created. As Paul proclaims in Ephesians 2, “We are what God made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” In his life and witness in the gospels, Christ continually pushes the story of God to proclaim that even those the church sought to exclude, were welcomed into God’s love. From the Samaritans, whom Christ offers as the best example of God’s love in the story of the man beaten and left for dead on the side of the road, to the Canaanites, who were unwelcomed by the Jews, and yet Jesus proclaims even they were capable of being of great faith, to the Ethiopians, who were among the first to be baptized after the creation of the church (and an Ethiopian eunuch at that!). Christ is continually welcoming those who are outcast because of their differences – be it their health, their personal background, or their non-Jewish beliefs.

This vision of God’s kingdom continues to call more and more people to the table. Acts 15 tells us of how the Gentiles were welcomed into the church. Though they had been excluded from the church because they had not followed all the “customary Jewish laws,” they were found to be filled with the Spirit, and were then welcomed into the church with no distinguishing features. Paul continues to pick up on this gracious and welcoming love of God in Galatians, as he makes the clearest statement of

God's inclusivity: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." "E. Stanley Jones commented on this by showing that in this one sentence, Paul "sweeps the field" of every distinction: racial, religious, cultural, economic, social, and sex (gender), concluding that 'nothing could be more thorough-going."<sup>iv</sup>

As we keep this Biblical witness in mind on the whole, when we return to Paul's letter to the church of Corinth, we can revisit the question and ask: what does this text say about God's eternal will, and how does that call us to faithfulness?

Paul has a very specific focus in this text – first and foremost, Paul is talking about the detriment of the church in utilizing the Roman courts. To make this points, Paul names specific abusive acts that go against God's desire for all people to be welcomed in the community of faith. To be clear, one's sexual orientation as part of their identity does not exclude them from the community of faith. Acts of power that abuse others excludes people; acts of addiction that place personal desire above the *shalom* of the community excludes people; acts of abuse that make it so we cannot be as one body excludes people; these are the practices Paul is speaking about that stand in the way of our faithful witness of God's love in the world. That's why Paul hated that they were taking each other to court, because it hurt the witness of God's love as proclaimed by the church in the world. That is why Paul frames the conversation with an end-times glimpse of abusive practices that God deems unworthy of the kingdom, because it hurts the witness of God's love as proclaimed in the world.

Paul had a specific focus in this text, and it wasn't covenantal, faithful, sacred, and permanent relationships between two people of any gender ... it was acts that abused, broke covenant, and forced unfaithful, non-sacred, adulterous sexual acts on others. Because these such acts go against the very foundation of God's desire for creation – a desire for us to be made whole, complete, and to share in the community of faith as active, engaged, welcomed, loved, and redeemed children of God.

If you want to know how to apply Paul's teaching in discerning and living a faithful witness today, first, read it in its appropriate context within the greater frame of the Biblical text. And then acknowledge that in this text, we are all put on notice by Paul for the abusive practices in our personal lives, and in our public witness, that deteriorate the witness of the church as the unified Body of Christ. The Body of Christ, where we are each invited to claim our call and our space, to be present, to be whole, to be loved, and to respond to a graceful invitation that as one body, as one community, as one people, as one witness, we may make plain and clear the love of God for everyone born. In the name of our Lord, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard B. Hays. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: First Corinthians*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Hays.

<sup>iii</sup> Ed Oxford. "Has 'Homosexual' always been in the Bible?" March 21, 2019. [forgeonline.org](http://forgeonline.org). Retrieved January 29, 2020.

<sup>iv</sup> Steve Harper. *Holy Love: A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019.