# The impact of a 1959 Bible translation on gay rights



In the world of Biblical translation, a significant but little-known event that occurred over half a century ago continues to have profound ripple effects in contemporary society. In 1959, Canadian seminary student David Sheldon Fearon identified what he believed to be a significant mistranslation in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible, specifically in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Fearon corresponded with the committee responsible for the RSV, expressing concerns over the inclusion of the word "homosexual" as a misinterpretation of the original Greek texts.

The RSV committee, formed in 1929, was tasked with creating a version of the Bible that would resonate with modern audiences while retaining the original texts' fidelity. With representatives from 44 Protestant denominations, this committee sought to rectify what they perceived as overly literal translations in the American Standard Version of 1901. During the translation process, the Greek words "malakoi" and "arsenokoitai" were interpreted, leading to the insertion of "homosexual" into the text. Fearon, however, advocated for a more nuanced reading of the Greek. He suggested that "malakoi" referred more to moral weakness than sexual orientation, while "arsenokoitai" indicated exploitative behaviours rather than consensual same-sex relationships.

Fearon’s letter, addressed to RSV committee leader Luther Allan Weigle, contained both academic arguments and a personal plea for justice, highlighting the damaging implications of the mistranslation for the LGBTQ+ community. While Weigle acknowledged the importance of Fearon's feedback and promised revisiting the issue, the committee only reconvened a decade later. By 1968, they had altered the term to "sexual perverts", a phrase that, by then, did not suffice to undo the societal impact of the earlier version.

Despite the correction, the incorporation of "homosexual" in the RSV of 1946 had already influenced numerous subsequent Bible translations and interpretations during the evangelical boom of the mid-20th century. This change laid a foundational stone for what is now a prevalent conservative Christian stance against LGBTQ+ individuals.

The misinterpretation has had far-reaching effects, extending beyond religious circles into societal attitudes and perceptions. Various translations of the Bible later integrated the term "homosexual" in different passages, cementing it within Christian scripts as an alternative to the past broader language. This development significantly informed and intensified anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric within some Christian communities, contributing to religious trauma and societal ostracization of LGBTQ+ individuals.

The legacy of this translation error is visible today, with religious beliefs doubling suicide risks for LGBTQ+ youth, a study has reported. Moreover, conversion therapy, often endorsed by religious leaders and pursued by parents, has been found to greatly increase the likelihood of suicide attempts among LGB individuals. The Trevor Project has noted Pennsylvania as having a notably high rate of conversion therapy practice, with 16% of LGBTQ+ youth there having been exposed to or threatened with it.

Amidst this backdrop, a movement within Christianity advocates for acceptance and protection of LGBTQ+ individuals. This movement seeks to reclaim and revise mistranslated Biblical texts to return focus to addressing moral and societal vices as originally intended, rather than targeting sexual orientation. As this shift gains momentum, it faces opposition from more conservative factions that persist in utilizing mistranslations to perpetuate a discriminatory narrative.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://broadview.org/david-fearon-death/> - Corroborates David Fearon's challenge to the RSV translation, his letter to the translation committee, and the impact of the mistranslation on the LGBTQ+ community.
* <https://canyonwalkerconnections.com/forging-a-sacred-weapon-how-the-church-became-anti-gay-hub/reverend-david/> - Details Fearon's letter to Dr. Luther A. Weigle, the RSV translation committee's decision, and the historical context of the translation error.
* <https://www.losangelesblade.com/2023/01/10/the-mistranslation-that-started-a-culture-war-the-man-who-found-it/> - Provides information on Fearon's discovery of the mistranslation, his academic background, and the personal and academic arguments presented in his letter.
* <https://canyonwalkerconnections.com/forging-a-sacred-weapon-how-the-church-became-anti-gay-hub/reverend-david/> - Explains the RSV committee's formation, their translation goals, and the specific Greek words 'malakos' and 'arsenokoites' that were misinterpreted.
* <https://broadview.org/david-fearon-death/> - Describes the committee's response to Fearon's letter, the delayed correction to 'sexual perverts,' and the lasting impact of the initial mistranslation.
* <https://www.losangelesblade.com/2023/01/10/the-mistranslation-that-started-a-culture-war-the-man-who-found-it/> - Details how the mistranslation influenced subsequent Bible translations and contributed to anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric within Christian communities.
* <https://canyonwalkerconnections.com/forging-a-sacred-weapon-how-the-church-became-anti-gay-hub/reverend-david/> - Highlights the far-reaching effects of the mistranslation on societal attitudes and perceptions, extending beyond religious circles.
* <https://broadview.org/david-fearon-death/> - Discusses the legacy of the translation error, including its impact on LGBTQ+ youth and the ongoing movement within Christianity to advocate for LGBTQ+ acceptance.
* <https://www.losangelesblade.com/2023/01/10/the-mistranslation-that-started-a-culture-war-the-man-who-found-it/> - Explains how the mistranslation has contributed to religious trauma and societal ostracization of LGBTQ+ individuals.
* <https://outsfl.com/history/a-view-in-our-past-lgbtq-history-month-2024> - Mentions Fearon's role in LGBTQ+ history and the significance of his challenge to the RSV translation.