

The Bible and Homosexuality

Preamble

As we make moral judgements about human sexual behaviour, whether, for instance, homosexual sex is acceptable under certain circumstances, or whether it is always reprehensible, it will not be long in our thinking as Christians before we turn to the Scriptures. Indeed, as Baptists, this often seems to be where we start. However, we never actually start with a blank canvas upon which we write biblical ethics or theology. There are always certain presuppositions that inform our approach, and which in turn need to be re-informed and reformed by Scripture itself. A failure to realise the importance of what we bring to Scripture, for good or ill, will hinder the important process of what God speaks to us through Scripture.

Just such a failure is in part the reason why Christians from different backgrounds hear God saying apparently different things from Scripture. As you wrestle with questions concerning homosexual orientation and homosexual behaviour and turn to Scripture to help there are certain questions you must ask yourself.

How readily can we discern truth in Scripture without taking into account the specific cultural contexts into which the original writers spoke? Can we read it straight off the page, or do we need to see whether the categories we apply to Scripture are the same as those applied by the original writer? This is particularly acute when we talk about 'homosexuality'. Does Paul, the writer of the Epistle to the Romans, mean the same thing as people today when he condemns homosexual acts? How significant are the cultural differences? Or do they count for little?

These questions are both theological and hermeneutic, and we avoid them at our peril if we want to find out what Scripture actually says, rather than making it say what we think it ought to say, determined by our particular presuppositions, be they conservative or liberal. So, for instance, if we believe, for whatever reason, that all homosexual acts are intrinsically sinful, we shall implicitly emphasise those Scriptures that seem to support a universal ban on gay sex. Or, if we are convinced that the New Testament does not address in any clear way the propriety of committed, faithful and monogamous homosexual partnerships between those whose sexual orientation is pronouncedly same-sex, we shall seek to apply cultural filters to those biblical passages which speak about homosexual acts, and emphasise what is not addressed, and especially who does not address those issues. Theological weight cannot rest wholly upon biblical exegesis.

What we can ill afford to do is to simplistically say 'the bible says' and leave it at that. At least, not if we want to make informed judgments that might convince others of their veracity.

So, let's come clean. We believe that the Scriptures warn against any expression of sexuality that is promiscuous or abusive, be it gay or straight. Theologically, we affirm that God is a God of covenant relationship who blesses all forms of faithful behaviour, be

that friendship; the love and care of parents for children (and in due time of children for aged parents;) and the love of a man and woman who are committed to one another in the relationship of marriage. The Old Testament includes all forms of covenant breaking amongst the sins it condemns: between individuals and between communities and nations. The theological basis of this for Christians is the doctrine of the Trinity: God as the God of eternal covenant community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who created humankind to be in relationship as an expression of that eternal nature. The *Imago Dei* in humankind is our propensity for relationship and love, the mark of the sinfulness of humankind, our propensity for selfishness, pride and hatred.

We have no problem with what Scripture affirms about marriage, nor do we have a problem with what Scripture condemns in promiscuous, covenant-free sex. What we must wrestle with is whether committed gay partnerships are closer to what might be affirmed, or closer to what should be condemned. That is the central question with which we should wrestle in these discussions about the biblical witness. Is homosexual orientation something like race or gender that is a 'given' of humanity? One cannot be anything but an English man, for instance, by virtue of one's birth. Or is it something that is re-definable, like 'class'. For instance, by virtue of education and profession a person might no longer in the same 'social class' as their family of origin. It has been renegotiated. Is homosexual orientation like that, something capable of change?

Now, gender is not intrinsically morally weighted. One is not a 'better' person because one is a man rather than a woman, (although the Christian church for a long period perversely taught something like that, to its shame) nor worse (although the feminist might, rightly, note that most violent crime, sexual abuse, and warfare owes more the male of the species than to the female.) But, orthodox Christian teaching has often specified a moral weight to sexual orientation. To be homosexual is to be morally in need of change and rooted in error in a way that heterosexuality is not.

The discussion will call forth from us virtues of generosity of spirit and humility towards our own judgments. These virtues are not always present amongst either conservative evangelicals on the one hand or radical liberals on the other, so firmly convinced as they often are of their own fidelity to the mission of the churchⁱ. We will not help one another as we approach Scripture if we become vindictive and derisive of those who differ from usⁱⁱ. So, with a gracious spirit borne of the Spirit of all grace, let's begin.

The sheer variety of texts raises the questions: which are relevant? which should we prioritise or privilege? The fact that we no longer permit what Scripture affirms (the slaughter of innocents or the acquisition of slaves,) and allow what Scripture explicitly forbids (the lending of money with interest, or usuryⁱⁱⁱ) demonstrates that the Christian church has through its history engaged in a process of revising its doctrine and morality. Those who would not permit any discussion of matters of homosexuality are now disallowing that process. Somewhat tendentiously one could say that the only logical outcome for those who would not allow a debate on the issue because 'the Scriptures are plain' would be for them to approve also of slavery and to repent of taking out a mortgage on their home! However, whatever pastoral concern for homosexual people

such conservative Christians might have, their reading of the Bible leaves them no room for manoeuvre in approving the gay lifestyle and practices.

Some more liberal readers of Scripture, on the other hand, claim that the problem arises from a too literalist reading of the texts, and a selective set of texts at that. Rather than simply disregard the Scriptures altogether, as most secular people might do in our culture, the search for a reading of Scripture that gives sufficient 'wobble-room' for the homosexual lifestyle to be approved is the goal of this enterprise. The danger is not to take Scripture seriously enough.

There are thirdly those who continue to affirm the full authority and inspiration of Scripture but who would view the 'plain reading' as inappropriately literal and which does not do justice to the majesty, breadth and reality of Scripture as the living word of God through whom the Spirit instructs and shapes the church.

Our task in this part of the course is to evaluate these approaches, to see whether there is merit in alternative readings, or whether the traditional disapproving reading of the texts about homosexuality continues to be a faithful hermeneutic in the light of serious biblical scholarship, including that which starts from a series of conservative presuppositions.

Before turning to the texts in detail, we might make a couple of general observations. First, the relative paucity of reference to homosexual acts probably arises from the relative infrequency of the abusive practice in ancient Israel. It was through contact with the Canaanite world, and in the New Testament world, the pagan Gentile cultures, that the issue arose. Here it is abusive expressions of homosexuality to which Scripture objects.

Secondly, the fact that Jesus does not explicitly commend or disapprove of homosexuality does not mean that he is silent about matters sexual. He strongly endorses faithfulness in marriage, although marriage itself is relativised in the context of discipleship in the Kingdom of God. He calls the woman caught in adultery to 'sin no more', while at the same time he refuses to condemn her to death. There is a subtle balance of approval and disapproval in Jesus' response which points us towards a similar rejection of either an easy-going reluctance to make any moral judgments, or a harsh condemnatory spirit that smacks more of the Pharisees for whom he reserved his harshest criticism.

Readings

Genesis 1:27-28

Genesis 2:18-24

Here we are dealing with the creation stories in Genesis.

Questions:

- *Is procreation the only purpose of heterosexual marriage? If not what else should it achieve? Could any of those other purposes be achieved in a homosexual relationship?*
- *Do you agree with Karl Barth that the complementarity of male and female, including the anatomical complementarity of the sexual organs, is what it means to be made in the image of God?^{iv}*
- *What value would you place upon the companionship between single people or gay partners? There is a long tradition in church life of single women sharing homes for reasons of economy, safety and companionship. Is this in some way blessed by reference to the second creation story, and could this be extended to friendship between people whose sexual orientation is homosexual?*

Genesis 19

- *Does this story have anything to say about sexual acts between two committed, loving gay partners?*

Most commentators believe the condemnation of Sodom was because of an abuse of hospitality and the violence of gang rape, not exclusively because homosexual sex was demanded. No other biblical reference to Sodom gives homosexuality as the reason for its destruction. However, there is no denying that the request was by a gang of men for sexual violence towards other men.

This is a good example of a passage of Scripture that must be allowed to speak on its own terms and where the later, spurious, exegesis of others has clouded the issue.

- *How might we read Genesis 19 in the light of Jesus' reference in Matthew 10:15, which places it in the context of hospitality, and in Jude 7, where it is the sexual misconduct which is emphasised?*
- *Why were these men interested only in male rape? Why did they not seek Lot's daughters first? Was there such a culture of widespread homosexual violence that the Scripture's revulsion is not simply a matter of abuse of hospitality?*

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

This is part of the Holiness Code in Leviticus, which stipulates in what circumstances people become ritually unclean and unable to come before God. The clarity of the prohibition against homosexual genital sex is undoubted. However, in this Holiness Code are included prohibitions against wearing garments made from both wool and linen, or eating food that combine milk and meat. Why do we choose to no longer apply these prohibitions, but emphasise the prohibition against homosexual acts?

Other people excluded from the presence of God were those with defective eyesight, lepers, the physically disabled, men with crushed testicles and menstruating women. Do we now believe that a woman is unclean, and not welcomed by God, during her period, or that God disfavors the disabled or partially sighted? Probably we would find such ideas repugnant. Yet, we need to determine why we continue to emphasize this issue of human sexuality, while ignoring other issues that concerned ancient Israel.

The verse which precedes Lev 18:22 is a prohibition against the giving of children as a sacrifice to Molech, a pagan deity worshipped through child sacrifice. This part of the Holiness Code concerns procreation and the sanctity of life. Is this why the (procreative) barren act of homosexual sex is prohibited, it does not produce offspring? The concern is that semen should not be wasted on activity that does not impregnate a woman and creates a new human life, (in a culture where infant mortality could be devastatingly high.) And is this why there is no equivalent prohibition against lesbianism? Or was it just unthought-of of by the male writers of the Old Testament, who, like Queen Victoria, refused to believe such a thing possible!

- *The crux of the issue is the distinguishing between enduring moral law and culturally specific 'cultic' law. In what category should we put homosexual acts?*
- *Sexual sins fall into both the moral law and the cultic. The Ten Commandments, for instance, condemn adultery. While Leviticus is concerned here with cultic law, does this mean that these prohibitions do not also have moral weight?*
- *Would the first readers of this text have distinguished between these two categories of law?*

The Gospels

There is nothing explicit about homosexuality in any of the Gospels. Jesus neither condemns nor approves of it. What we can say is that Jesus defends and affirms the highest standards in marriage.

We can also say that Jesus' defence of marriage and his refusal to accept the spurious reasons for divorce that men often gave, were probably because of the damage it did to the vulnerable women thereby pushed to the margins of society. Jesus exercises an option for the most vulnerable ... children, women, the sick, and the widowed, which challenges the casual patriarchal abuse of the weak by the powerful.

- *Do you think that homosexuals would be included in the category of 'the powerful' or 'the weak'?*
- *Some have argued that Jesus accepts every person, but what would have been the nature of Jesus' acceptance of the homosexual. Do you think that his silence on the matter signifies approval?*

The one possible encounter between Jesus and a homosexual is recounted in Luke 7:1-10 and Matthew 8:5-13, the Roman Centurion whose servant is gravely ill. Many Roman Centurions engaged in homosexual activity, especially with slaves, and the word used here for servant was used in Hellenistic culture for a man's younger male lover, (v7, *pais*, child) although it also more usually served to denote simply a child, with no sexual connotations. What is clear, if the child was indeed the Centurion's young lover, Jesus took no particular interest in this aspect of the relationship, but responded with compassion to the need.^v

- *How do you react to this possible reading of Luke 7?*

St Paul

1 Corinthians 6:9

1 Timothy 1:9-10

In these two lists of vices, two groups of people are condemned: *malakoi* (male prostitutes) and *arsenokoita* (sodomites). The debate over the exact meaning of these two words has resulted in a large body of writing, so that one theologian has written, 'Faced with yet another attempt to get at the meaning of *arsenokoites* by philology, I cry: Enough! You have satisfied the curiosity of a generation!'^{vi}

For some this is simply a clear reference to homosexuals, but others argue for a more nuanced interpretation, claiming that Paul is certainly condemning a form of homosexual practice, that of male prostitution by young men or boys and its corrupting paedophilic tendencies. But, they argue, those who advocate the acceptance of homosexual partnerships, also condemn such practice. What these prohibitions do not refer to, they argue, is the committed, faithful and monogamous partnerships between two men, or women, that the church is being asked to acknowledge. Those who want to take Scripture very seriously are at pains to point out that we cannot easily transpose the Greek cultural phenomenon of older men seeking younger men for sexual favours, which Paul would have known about only too well from his travels and disapproved of along with other cosmopolitan Jews and also Stoics, into the modern culture of stable homosexual partnerships. What both he and contemporary Christians agree is sinful is the same kind of promiscuous, exploitative sex which is still part of the gay scene, and was much more pronounced in the decades before AIDS appeared in San Francisco.

- *Do you think Paul is speaking about all homosexual practice for all time, or just that expression of it which was current in the first century Greek world?*

- *If arsenokoita, ('sleepers with men') is condemned by Paul because it is an exploitative relationship, how might he have distinguished between all homosexual relationships and those that are explicitly exploitative? Indeed would he do so, or does*

he see all homosexual relationships as inherently exploitative, and therefore all to be rejected? If this is the case, was he correct to do so?

Romans 1:26-27

This is perhaps the most crucial New Testament passage. This is, apparently, a clear condemnation of both homosexual and lesbian practice, and for some/most an open and shut case for the Church viewing both as sinful and requiring repentance from any who practice such sexual activity. However, even here there are questions to be asked. Is Paul referring to the cultic homosexual practice that went on in pagan temples, in a deliberate echo of Canaanite cult prostitution condemned in the Old Testament? Or does his wording of 'exchange' refer to those heterosexuals who, in seeking ever more excitement from sex, experiment with gay sex, when their orientation is predominantly 'straight'? Or is this again a reference to pederasty, the predominant expression of homosexual behaviour widely practiced in the Greek world? Certainly some of the words Paul uses ('that which is against nature', 'shameless') were used by Paul's contemporaries who shared his disapproval. One view of 1:26 notes that nowhere is 'natural use' used in ancient literature for lesbian sex, but rather Paul is alluding to inordinate desire within heterosexual relations, with women 'using' men for sexual satisfaction.^{vii} The philosophers in the ancient world had a synonym for correct use, the very phrase Paul employs, natural use, (φυσικη χρησης) and it referred to an avoidance of luxury and the control of passion. In other words, what Paul is describing is not homosexual sex per se, but inordinate desire and the problem of the loss of self-control in the face of erotic love.^{viii} 'Strictly speaking the passage about so-called 'unnatural' sexual practices (vv.26-27) does not refer to them as 'sin' or morally wrong But rather as unusual or shameful and socially dishonourable.'^{ix}

It is also of interest to note that the word used by Paul to describe God's action in 'giving them up' (παρεδοκεν, *paredoken*, God gave them up to degrading passions, Rom 1:26) is used elsewhere in Romans of God's actions in Christ, (4:25, παρεδοθη *paredothe*, was handed over to death; 8:32, παρεδοκεν □ *paredoken*, gave him up for all of us.) Is Paul deliberately using the same word here to contrast God's actions through Christ to save the world with his action towards sinners in judgement?

By contrast, the word used for against nature, *para fusin*, την φυσικην χρησην εις □ την παρα φυσιν, 'the natural use to the use against nature' (1:26), is used only in one other place in Paul, also in Romans, where it is employed to describe the unnatural grafting of the gentiles, the wild olive, into Israel, the cultivated olive, παρα φυσιν ενεκεντρισθησ εις καλλιελαιον, *against nature was grafted into a cultivated olive*, (11:24) Eugene Rogers^x notes that it is odd that what is deemed judgemental in Romans 1:26 (*against nature*), should be precisely the activity that God engages in in Romans 11:24, (*contrary to nature*.) These might be minor matters of textual concern, but much hangs upon understanding Paul's precise meaning in this first chapter of Romans.

This raises the awkward question of whether God sometimes 'goes against nature', and radically revises the way of things that were once refused, but are now accepted. If the inclusion of the Gentiles were one such radical reversal of what seemed like the ways of God (so radical that it constituted the gravest crisis in the New Testament church, with the argument between Paul and Peter over the response to the Gentiles just one example, Galatians 2:11-14,) and in more recent times the now universal refusal to justify slavery being a reversal of what seems to be tolerated in Scripture, might the inclusion of homosexuals under the same conditions of faithfulness of relationships and holiness of lifestyle as heterosexuals, be another 'historic' reversal, of God 'going against nature'? This would understandably be met with as much questioning and resistance as did God's inclusion of the Gentiles or the church's stance in condemning slavery.^{xi}

The key response here is that while slavery is an abuse of human dignity and freedom, to be universally condemned, homosexual and lesbian practice carries with it moral weight which is not concerned with human freedom, but rather a debated morality. There is no consensus in our society about the morality of homosexual practice, and many would continue to view it as morally reprehensible, including a majority of Christians.

It is also debated whether Paul is setting out in Romans 1 what his opponents are saying, in order to demolish this view later in the Epistle, where Spirit-incorporation into Christ is the preferred model of salvation. Douglas Campbell has argued for a radical re-think of the message of Paul's Letter to the Romans, owing less to Luther's understanding of justification by faith.

In evaluating the evidence for the question of the breadth of homoerotic activity described in Romans 1, (all-embracing, or pederasty only, for instance,) Robert Jewett argues that Paul, as a first-century Jew, makes no distinction between pederasty and relationships between adult, consenting males. The entire realm of same-sex relations is a proof of divine wrath, and the perverted relationships themselves are the punishment for the exchange of the worship of God for the lie of worship of the creature.

The problems remain in transferring to our own, predominantly heterosexual, culture arguments employed by Paul in the aggressively bisexual culture of the ancient Graeco-Roman world, where it was expected of masters to dominate their slaves, and to express this by sexual dominance. Since many of the early Christians were slaves, or former slaves, (two thirds of Rome's population were slaves,) the liberating gospel proclaimed by Paul was a repudiation of the sexual exploitation by the powerful and the dominant over the powerless and resisted the aggressive bisexuality as a sign of God's wrath.

The other question concerns the purpose of this passage in Paul's overall argument. The great failing was not homosexual practice, but the exchange of worship of God for worshipping the creature instead. Homosexual practice is, then, not the cause of God's judgement, but the result of it. God gives them up, and the result is depravity. In other words, Paul is not aiming to 'prove the evils of perverse sexual behaviour'; that is simply

assumed from the outset, both by Paul and his audience. The aim is to develop a thesis about the manifestation of divine wrath in the human experience of Paul's time.^{xii} Why, then, choose homoerotic sex as the activity that demonstrates God's wrath upon human waywardness? Is it because it is more sinful than other activities, such as greed, pride or drunkenness? Elsewhere in the writings of Paul he bundles together all manner of vices without order of wickedness, and so it cannot be that homosexuality is chosen because it is the worst of sins, but because in Paul's culture it demonstrates so visibly the wrath of God and his 'giving over' of a godless culture, in contrast to the created order which demonstrates the existence of God so visibly and with such clarity, in Paul's argument, that no-one can be without excuse. It would be wrong, therefore, to make homosexuality the touchstone of orthodoxy, in the way it has been so often used recently, from Romans 1.

- *Is Paul condemning all homosexual practice, or is he only condemning practices which even strong advocates for the acceptance of stable homosexual partnerships would condemn?*
- *Paul has a view of what is 'natural', and that excludes homosexual practice in all, or some, of its expressions. What would be 'natural' for someone of an overwhelmingly homosexual orientation?*

The Different Views Held.

As a result of engaging with the Scriptures, and aware of the presuppositions we bring to Scripture, a range of interpretative positions might be adopted.

¹• Scripture uniformly condemns homosexual practice, both in the Old and New Testaments, and the Church should view it always as sinful. Some would place it in the same moral category as paedophilia and bestiality. To be a homosexual, whether practicing or not, is in and of itself to be unacceptable to God, and to be excluded from the people of God.

- Scripture does not know of homosexual orientation, but it does denounce homosexual acts, which are always sinful, and the call must be for repentance. A celibate homosexual, however, is no more sinful than a celibate heterosexual, although he or she might be in greater need of healing and transformation, so that the possibility of a procreative marriage relationship becomes possible.

- Scripture does not know of a homosexual orientation, and would not condemn any person who is of a homosexual orientation to 'un-natural' heterosexual sex with someone of the opposite gender, but it does condemn other forms of homosexual expression, such as temple prostitution, pederasty, promiscuity or the search by heterosexuals for illicit sexual thrills. However, Scripture does affirm the value of

celibacy, for homosexual and heterosexual alike, and this option must be realistically promoted in a culture, which sees sexual fulfilment as a right and a necessity.

- What Scripture everywhere affirms is covenant loyalty, and this is given its clearest affirmation in marriage. However, it can be also expressed in faithful, loving and monogamous homosexual partnerships between two people of pronounced same-sex orientation, and as such worthy of the blessing of the Church as an expression of God's purpose for human community, which is loving and committed human relationship.

In determining which of these (or more nuanced variations of them,) the local church, minister or Christian affirms, remember it will not be just a particular reading of Scripture which is solely the cause, but also the experience we bring, the theological understanding we have of God, and the conviction we hold about the degree of inclusivity or exclusivity of the people of God.

ⁱ 'Ours is a time in which it is depressingly easy to make this or that issue a test of Christian orthodoxy in such a way as to make wholly suspect the theology of anyone disagreeing on the issue in question.' Rowan Williams 'Knowing myself in Christ' in (ed) Timothy Bradshaw *The Way Forward?* Hodder and Stoughton, London 1997, p.12

ⁱⁱ Williams goes on to say, 'a major goal ... is to enter a plea for the recognition that those who want to argue what I have called a revisionist position on the possible legitimacy of 'sexual expression' for the person of homosexual inclination may, like their opponents, be trying to find a way of being faithful and obedient to the givens of revelation.' *Op cit* p.19

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 25:35-37

^{iv} Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol III, pt 4, p.184 (T&T Clark, Edinburgh,)

^v Ian K Duffield, *The Clear Teaching of the Bible? A Contribution about Homosexuality and the Church of England.* The Expository Times, Vol 115(4) January 2004, p.114.

^{vi} Oliver O'Donovan, Homosexuality in the Church: Can there be a fruitful theological debate? In (ed) Timothy Bradshaw, *The Way Forward?* Hodder and Stoughton, London 1997, p.28

^{vii} David E Fredrickson Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27. in (ed) David L Balch, *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2000, p.201. cf J Miller, 'The Practices of Romans 1:26; Homosexual or Heterosexual? *Nov T* [1995]: 4-8,10. Note that Robert Jewett thinks it likely that Paul has in mind homoerotic love between women rather than oral or anal intercourse with men. The Social Context and Implications of Homoerotic References in Romans. in (ed) David L Balch *op cit* p.233

^{viii} 'it is anachronistic and inappropriate to think that Paul condemns homosexuality as unnatural and praises heterosexuality as a reflection of the God-given order of things. Sexual activity between males is not portrayed as the violation of a male-female norm given with creation but as

an example of passion into which God has handed over persons who have dishonoured him. The immediate problem is passion, not the gender of the persons having sex.’ Idem p.222

^{ix} Ian K Duffield, *The Clear Teaching of the Bible? A Contribution about Homosexuality and the Church of England*. The Expository Times, Vol 115(4) January 2004, p.112.

^x Eugene Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999

^{xi} ‘We are obsessed by the sexual dimensions of the body. The first-century Mediterranean world was obsessed by the social implications of food and table-fellowship. The decision to let the Gentiles in “as is” and to establish a more inclusive form of table-fellowship, we should note, came into direct conflict with the accepted interpretation of Torah and what God wanted of humans.’ Luke Timothy Johnson, Disputed Questions: Debate and Discernment, Scripture and the Spirit. In (ed) Eugene Rogers, *Theology and Sexuality*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, p.371

^{xii} Robert Jewett, The Social Context and Implications of Homoerotic References in Romans, in (ed) David L Balch *op cit.* p. 231