

Approaching the Bible on Issues of Homosexuality and Leadership

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When we approach the Bible on matters such as sexuality, we need to be aware of two seemingly contradictory experiences. On the one hand, scripture is something which can immediately address us in the here and now, so that through it we hear the voice of God; and on the other hand, we need to take seriously the wide gulf between our world and that of its authors, 2000 and more years ago, and sense that distance. These two need not be in conflict. Indeed, often it is in seeing things at a distance that we see them more clearly. Taking scripture seriously means seeking as far as possible to hear it within its own context from within its own world. In many ways it is like any other cross-cultural encounter, where to take people seriously means respecting their difference, learning their language, or at least seeking to understand their culture. In fact one could argue that often no real encounter goes on until we do so. In the Uniting Church we treasure the scriptures precisely because we stand in a long tradition of men and women across the ages who believe that they make real encounter possible, indeed, encounter with God, but this takes place within the context of acknowledging the place of these writings in their own history and culture. This is why the Basis of Union not only affirms scripture, but also underlines the importance of careful scholarship which enables us to hear and understand it in its own terms.

Two Different Worlds

In the area of sexuality so many things are different between now and then. In modern Australian society sex is prominent in entertainment, dress, conversation, and public expression in ways that are quite foreign to many other cultures today, including some within multi-cultural Australia, and would certainly have been foreign to the world of the biblical writers. Our up-front approach to sex would have been offensive, far beyond the excesses which we sometimes deplore. If written records are any indication, then the ideal was to keep sex under wraps. Courtship and dating rarely feature in the records because they were not the norm. Girls were kept at home and closely guarded by their fathers until they became brides and that was mainly not a matter of their choice, but something arranged between fathers and future sons-in-law. Without adequate contraception, a very recent phenomenon, there was always the great risk of falling pregnant, so a high price was set (quite literally) on virgins. That was also because they were deemed likely to remain faithful when married, if they had been chaste while single. Similarly adultery was disastrous, not just for the hurt and intrusion which we deplore, but because it could so easily result in the birth of children who belonged nowhere or who became a constant source of family worry and intrigue, threatening to undermine family stability. Family stability was paramount, because survival depended on ensuring continuity of one's inheritance and having enough for hard times. There was, after all, nothing like the modern welfare state.

The tendency was always to worry less about men's behaviour than about women's because obviously men could not fall pregnant. That created a double standard. It was exacerbated by the fact that men usually married around the age of 30 and girls in their late teens. Keeping watch over daughters could hardly hold out longer. Keeping watch over sons at best meant warning them of dangers, such as we find in the

instructions in Proverbs 1 – 9. They somewhat play down prostitution, putting far greater emphasis on adultery and the fearful consequences unleashed through an angry husband. Having more than one wife, like the patriarchs, was a kind of buffer against adultery, but when having just one wife by choice and not just by economic necessity became the fashion and the norm, adultery became more acute. Adultery spelled the end of a marriage, as the story of Mary and Joseph in Matthew illustrates. It was only a matter of how shaming or otherwise one made the divorce. It was enshrined in law, both Jewish and Roman, that there should be no way back, though there must have been exceptions. Forget marriage counselling!

As a general rule men ran households. All household members were at the disposal of the man. That included both his wife or wives or concubines, but also slaves, with whom many saw sexual relations as part of the man's right. The silence on the practice in the New Testament is ambiguous; in the Old it is assumed. Issues of concern focussed mainly on what threatened a man's interests: adultery by his wife and his daughter losing her virginity.

This was not the end of the community's concerns. Some concerns were about cultic purity: rites of washing and waiting till sundown to be pure again after male emissions during intercourse or otherwise, and observing abstinence of intercourse during menstruation and other times of ritual impurity like after childbirth. People recognised incest, with some overlap with our genetic concerns which make some marriages illegal, but across a wider range including both blood and non-blood relatives. Sexual abuse of children within their own families or beyond them was equally abhorred and in all likelihood prompted Jesus' warning about sinking oneself in the sea attached to a millstone. Some things were simply out of place because they were seen as deliberate perversions of the created order. There were things that belonged together and others that did not. As in agriculture some things were not to be mixed, like different fibres in one garment, different seeds in one field, or meat with milk, so sex was forbidden between humans and animals, and between males (also between females, though nowhere as prominent). It was disorder. Where the ethic of love for neighbour informed people's understanding of God's will and the commandments, all forms of sexual violence towards women (such as the Levite's concubine) or men (such as at Sodom) were condemned.

Instructions and Values, Then and Now

It was a very different world, which makes it difficult, then, for us to take over instructions meant for their setting as if they could apply to ours without further ado. The instruction that wives obey husbands, slaves obey masters, and children obey parents, for instance, assumes the ancient household structure. Not all of it can or should survive. We have long since said goodbye to slavery, nor do we espouse subordination of women. We could, therefore, set out all the pieces of biblical instruction on a table and sort them into simple categories: what still applies and what does not. The problem with such an approach is that we would too easily miss the underlying themes and values. Even if we would never want to take up the instruction about slaves, it is important that we see what was going on under the surface. It was quite revolutionary and eventually led to slavery's abolition: slaves are to be treated as people of worth, whom God loves – as much as masters! This is and remains the word of the Lord.

When we listen beneath the surface, we find ourselves identifying some core values, which ultimately take us back to who God is and to Christ. This is not only something we can recognise beneath many of the instructions; it is also a basis for our facing new situations from the same perspective. Many ancient values are as current today as they ever were and speak to us across the millennia. These certainly include the belief that God is good and that God's creation is good, however we might abuse it. That means: being human, having human feelings, thoughts, and experiences, is good. More than that, our sexuality is good and so are the sexual relations which celebrate intimacy and are the foundation of marriage, as the early Genesis stories represent in their colourful reworking of ancient myths. It needs to be said clearly that this stands in opposition to views, ancient and modern, which see sex as dirty or as only for procreation or as belonging to the material world of flesh and blood which spiritual people should ignore or suppress. The biblical writers over, perhaps, 1000 years, generally affirmed human sexual intimacy (including Paul though with some reluctance), saw its fulfilment in marriage (even if very different from marriage today), and recognised sexual attraction as something in itself positive to which responses could be appropriate or inappropriate, healthy or destructive.

One might argue about the health of our culture compared with theirs. Theirs would very probably be strongly on the side of those cultures today which deplore western commercialisation of sex and implicit sexual exploitation and point to levels of abuse in our society as symptomatic that we are far from getting it right. We are probably good at the best we affirm, such as the rights of all people, including the affirmation of women and respect for children, and quite bad in the abuses we tolerate. The word of love and respect for all human beings, including in their sexual differences, confronts our society, coming from deep within scripture, indeed from the heart of God.

Such encounter also strikes ambiguities, especially when we are faced with assessing what to respect as belonging to another culture and what to discern as still applicable today. Nowhere has this been more acute in recent years than in what people commonly call homosexuality and homosexual practice. Such language (homosexuality and homosexual practice) would have made little sense in the biblical world, where the common assumption was that all human beings were heterosexual, as patently evident in their different sexual genitalia. While some people were seen as effeminate, for instance, mostly that kind of language was preserved to condemn those men who engaged in homosexual acts such as anal intercourse where they allowed themselves to be penetrated by other men, that is, acting like women. While in the predominant Greco-Roman culture most condemnation fell on such men, but also frequently on their partners, the biblical writers, Jewish and Christian, were quite unambiguous. Such behaviour represented a perversion of God's order of creation and people who committed such acts were seen as deliberately denying their true nature as heterosexual, whether as men or women. It made sense to them to lump it together with such behaviour as sexual penetration of animals.

Biblical Passages on Homosexual Relations

Of the allusions to homoerotic attitudes and behaviour in the Bible four deal with only behaviours and only one with both. Lev 18:22 and 20:13 condemn, as they put it,

lying with a man as with a woman as an abomination in the context of prohibitions about incest, sex with a menstruating woman, adultery, and bestiality, all seen as characteristic of foreign peoples. These prohibitions belong within a wider context which includes provisions about witches; clean and unclean foods; mixing of fibres, animals, and seed; the right to have sex with slaves, and not least, loving one's neighbour.

In response to this material we make choices. Some of them are straightforward: we happily combine different fibres, for instance. Others, which are straightforward for us, were far from straightforward for the first Christians. For instance, they were divided about whether or not to observe the laws about clean and unclean food. Various factors played a role in their debates. Some insisted that the biblical law was unambiguous and so should never be set aside. Others argued that such laws created a barrier with Gentiles, especially sharing meals with them. Such compassion for Gentiles was also an argument rooted in scripture. Others argued that such laws never made any sense in the first place. Thus Mark depicts Jesus as dismissing food laws because food simply enters the stomach and then the toilet so cannot make a person unclean. Generally the approach which argued from the deeply rooted biblical value of compassion won the day against those who insisted that the prohibitions were inviolable. No longer requiring circumcision was another instance. These differences caused considerable pain and anger, as one sees all the way through Paul's letters, where he refers to believers who constantly attacked his approach to scripture.

On the other hand, even the more daring first Christians like Paul would have upheld the prohibition of bestiality and homosexual acts, but almost certainly not simply because they were there as explicit instructions – for so were the others. The reason for such prohibitions are often very complex and, like the efficacy of sacrifices, simply assumed without a self-conscious theoretical framework. This is often the case with sexual mores. Some have suggested that the underlying concern was about whatever prevented procreation, though other evidence suggests that sexual union was valued aside from this. The most likely ground for upholding the prohibition was the principle of order in creation and so keeping separate what should remain separate.

Two words in Paul's list of those excluded from the kingdom of God in 1 Cor 6:9, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* (also 1 Tim 1:9), probably confirm that Paul, like all Jews whose writings we have from his time, upheld the prohibition, though their exact meaning remains a matter of debate. His list matches the order of topics in the ten commandments of his Greek Bible, and shows that he associates these sins with the first prohibition of its second table, adultery. Differentiating *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* probably reflects both Leviticus and the common designation of the passive partner in such relations as being effeminate, something they saw as shameful for a man. Whereas most non-Jewish writers abhorred the prospect of man acting as women, Paul, informed by his Jewish heritage, abhorred both. Some have argued that the concern is only with male prostitution or pederasty, but the broader focus is more likely.

Paul's most helpful exposition comes incidentally in Romans 1 – 3 as he depicts the depravity of humankind in general (including Jews) before his rhetorical challenge to self-righteous Jews. Paul depicts the human situation as one in which people have denied the true nature of God's being and instead worshipped animals as gods. As a

consequence God gave them over to their desires with the result that they engaged in a similar denial of their own nature, dishonouring themselves. So they not only “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25), but also “their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another” (1:26-27). In the passage Paul employs Stoic notions of nature to express biblical notions of order (the two were very similar) and attributes the malaise inclusively to both women and men. One might read this as reflecting the view that they became homosexual (indicated by the redirection of their desire), not as something of their doing, but God’s, but this is unlikely and would, in effect, blame God. Rather, Paul is arguing rather that just as with God, they denied God’s nature and went off after other gods, so they deliberately denied their own nature, their heterosexuality, and chose to lust after those of their own sex – and God let it happen. This is not about the fall of Adam, but about the consequences of idolatry through history, more specifically deliberately choosing to ignore who God is and who you are. Paul concludes by expanding his account of a warped mind and behaviours to include a wide range of manifestations beyond homosexual acts (1:28-32).

Thus Paul condemns both homosexual acts and homosexual attitudes and this is best understood broadly, rather than as referring only, for instance, to pederasty or prostitution, or as referring, in the case of women, to female bestiality, as some have suggested. Typically, Paul goes beyond citing prohibitions to address the underlying values and rationale. His argument is straightforward: homosexual acts and attitudes which result from the choice to deny one’s nature represent perversion. Like other Jewish writers of his time and before, Paul reaches this conclusion because he believes that all people are by nature heterosexual - that is crucial to his argument – and that God made them so, male and female. People who do not believe that all people are by nature heterosexual will reach different conclusions. There is evidence that some in Paul’s world did contemplate people might have been born with a different orientation, but Paul is very unlikely to have agreed.

It is important to see that Paul and many others went beyond citing Bible texts to make his case. After all, those believers who dogged him through his ministry about matters like circumcision did that. Instead Paul thought theologically. One of the important foundations for his thought, and indeed, all Christian thought since, is the account of creation in Genesis. We need to approach the Genesis creation accounts with the same open critical engagement as we do other texts, including Leviticus 18 – 20. For the Genesis stories, too, present us with a complex array of choices, many of which we have long since made, but which entail critical distance from how these texts would have been read by New Testament writers and Jesus, himself. The issues range from negotiating two creation stories which stand in some tension to the notion of creation’s days, the garden of Eden, the making of man, then of woman, and much else, not to speak of the issues raised by chapter 3.

Few negotiate these texts without making important hermeneutical choices. Some concepts embodied in the text have occasioned profound reflection, not least, *imago dei*, inviting us to go far beyond authorial intent, were it recoverable, and first century understandings. We should not have to justify such creative reflections only on the basis of the little that is in the text, but we need to be aware of what we are doing

when we choose (as we must) to go beyond it and we should never falsify the text by reading into it what is not there, however profound and valid our reflections. In its world the text's depiction of woman's creation by separation and then rejoining to the man would be understood within the framework of creating the ancient patriarchal household beset by assumptions far removed from values we commonly assume. Precisely in encountering the text in its strangeness and otherness, however, we also find ourselves brought back to some very basic notions about companionship, including sexual companionship (not bound by concern with procreation). Jesus, who would have approached such texts on the basis of first century presuppositions, affirmed such values as a basis for rejecting divorce.

The creation stories require the same quality of engagement as other biblical texts. They do not say all that there is to say about human sexuality and human relations (or creation, for that matter), nor should they be privileged above other biblical texts as somehow inerrant or exempt from critical inquiry. To argue that they have special status because Jesus cited them is very precarious, because we should assume that Jesus would have also believed the things in the chapters which we have long since ceased to believe. There is no escape from the vulnerability of responsible hermeneutics. Taking them seriously means engaging them as far as possible within their own frame of reference. In such engagement they speak profoundly to us while retaining their own integrity as reflecting the ancient world's views of reality. Our scientific insights which set those views in perspective need not silence their address to us. But, as with other biblical texts, we cannot avoid making assessments about what remains pertinent and what should be respectfully acknowledged as belonging to another world.

As Paul engaged these stories from within his world view, it is very probable that he would not have questioned such things as the days and sequence of creation or the origin of all human beings from the single couple Adam and Eve in a literal sense. We may also assume that he would have read the statement that God made people male and female as implying that all people are heterosexual, either male or female. This, in turn, informed his conclusion that anyone engaging in homosexual relations and embracing homosexual desire is guilty of perverting God's order and therefore of grave sin. That makes good sense on Paul's assumptions.

Our choices constitute our hermeneutics. Such choices are not an invention of the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th century. Hermeneutics were at the heart of Jesus' conflicts with his contemporaries, Paul's, even with his fellow Christians, and the gospel writers' various depictions of Jesus and his attitude towards scripture. Their choices were informed by a mixture of values, certainly by more than what scripture mandated, but never in disregard of it, and usually over against more restrictive viewpoints. When Paul moves from the relative contrast of circumcision of the heart and circumcision of the body to abandoning the latter, and Mark from the relative contrast of external and internal impurity, to abandoning the former, the reasons are complex, including appeal to their day's common sense, but more profoundly to compassion for non-Jews. Jesus' parables often make similar appeals to people's common sense as a way of doing theology and subverting some notions of God, most tellingly illustrated by the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Grappling with Choices

It is only in recent times that the belief has become widespread that not all homosexual people are that way because they have subverted their heterosexuality. While some appear to do just that and others appear just to be going through a phase of development, there are many for whom over many years their sexual orientation seems to be naturally not toward the opposite sex but members of their own. That realisation has had to make its way to the surface of public awareness through many objections, including legal provisions. It is fair to say that most who would now assume this to be real do so in a way that clearly discriminates genuine from spurious claims and from continuing manifestations of exploitative homosexual predation on a par with heterosexual predation. An appreciation has emerged that there are people who in no way fall into those negative categories and that over the centuries these people have been victims of appalling discrimination, indeed, persecution, and in some contexts still are. There are now too many stories of wonderful, generous, creative and loving homosexual people, including people in leadership within the community and the church, for this simply to be brushed aside.

Where this is acknowledged to be so (and not all see it this way), there is a need to bring such insight into engagement with those biblical statements written in a context where people believed homosexual activity manifested a deliberate perversion of God's creation and therefore a paradigm of sin. If we believe that there are people who fall outside the categories in which the biblical writers thought, then we cannot with integrity apply to them what we find in Paul or Leviticus. We have to go back to the values which lie beneath the surface, and ultimately to the heart of God, the God of compassion whose seeks always what is good for people. Accordingly many Christians believe that we should embrace people with such a different sexual orientation as we do any other and encourage them like any other to express their sexuality in ways that cohere with love and respect for all people.

There are, however, contrary views. Some, for instance, continue to argue the biblical position that all homosexual behaviour arises from deliberate perversion and is therefore sin. Others go partly beyond the biblical position, by choosing to view such people as having a different sexual orientation not because of deliberate perversion, but as a condition which may have arisen from no fault of their own and for which they should seek therapy. A further implication of this view is that such homosexually oriented people should not engage in homosexual activity. They usually argue this on the grounds that they are forbidden in scripture, but also because it makes matters worse to do so when the aim should be to reverse the orientation. Some, in addition, have argued that this state of being is a fruit of the fall of Adam, though clearly Paul sets it outside that framework as a product of people denying God's nature and then their own. Most who seriously consider homosexual orientation as a condition approach people beset with it with compassion and support. So they, too, find their inspiration in the heart of God. Accordingly they argue that such people should be welcomed in the church, but until they have undergone successful therapy, should not exercise leadership. It is consistent with their position also to resist anything which would undermine such change, such as blessing homosexual relationships.

The position of those seeing homosexuality as a condition would collapse if research showed that for some people homosexual orientation is something hard-wired, part of genetic make-up. This has not been shown, though a most recent Swedish study points

to difference in brain patterns. What is amply demonstrated, however, is that there are many people who appear on all accounts to be healthy and mature by all other standards but who have such an orientation. Is there sufficient evidence for us to believe that theirs, too, is a condition, and so to discourage them from expressing their sexuality? Or does the evidence (or lack of it), justify the conclusion that we have no such warrant, but should encourage them to express their sexuality with the same level of responsibility as heterosexual people and also not debar them from exercising leadership like anyone else? Given the lack of absolute certainty on both sides, one can at least recognise that setting all relationships within the context of mutual love and respect is a safeguard against the dangers which many have feared. In this we need to take seriously what those most affected have to say. A healthy community should be able to find ways of accommodating such differences and living with a degree of flexibility, given the current state of knowledge and experience.

Further Reading

There have been many individual studies over recent years. Apart from these there have also been a number of edited collections, reflecting current research, and each collection presenting a wide range of viewpoints.

Balch, David L., *Homosexuality and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000)

Brawley, Robert L. *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996)

Edgar, Brian and Gordon Preece, *Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority? Homosexual Practice, Marriage, Ordination, and the Church* (Interface: A Forum for Theology in the World 9,1-2; Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 2006)

Seow, Choon-Leong *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996)

Via, Dan O. and Robert A. J. Cagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003)