

Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality and Leadership

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Let me begin with my tentative conclusion. Some people really do appear to be homosexual, in contrast to many others who might be temporarily so or have labelled themselves so in a way that has closed options. At the moment research is inconclusive about the extent of genetic, environmental, and other factors which produce this outcome, but I cannot deny that some are so, often despite many years of struggling to change that outcome and frequently accompanied by considerable pain and discrimination. I want to live in a community where this is acknowledged and where they can express their sexuality and exercise leadership within and beyond the church with the same integrity and responsibility expected of all other people. I espouse this view on the basis of faith informed by and engaged with the tradition, not least the biblical witness.

In that engagement I acknowledge that I have made hermeneutical decisions, as I believe we all must, and have thereby weighted some values of scripture above others in ways that inevitably conflict with decisions of others. I see no need to interpret specific texts of scripture to suit my conclusion, but on the contrary want to uphold the integrity of its text. This belongs to the gospel values which also inform my respecting the integrity of people, including homosexual people. My stance is vulnerable at many points, something I believe I share also with those who reach different conclusions. I want to belong to a community where we can live with different conclusions and make room for different outcomes, but already to say that is to espouse a particular set of values which are themselves debatable.

I want to make some brief comments about the texts dealing with homoerotic attitudes and behaviour. Four deal with the latter, one with both. Lev 18:22 and 20:13 condemn 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 other peoples. They 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, which to many, including some of the first believers, was outrageous, but we do so on the basis not of one text overriding another, but of values informed both by scripture itself and by reason, itself, as when Mark depicts Jesus as dismissing food laws because food simply enters the stomach and then the toilet so cannot make a person unclean. It seems very likely that in their choices even the more daring first Christians like Paul would have upheld the prohibition of bestiality and homosexual acts, while not upholding 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. Perhaps it was concern about whatever prevented procreation, though other evidence suggests that sexual union was valued aside from this. There is in any case an assumption about order and keeping separate what should remain separate.

The two words in Paul's prohibited list in 1 Cor 6:9, *μαλακοί* and *ἀρσενοκοῖται* (also 1 Tim 1:9), confirm that Paul like all Jews whose writings we have from his time upheld the prohibition and saw it as implied in the first prohibition of the second table

of the LXX Decalogue which dictates the order of the list. Differentiating *μαλακοί* and *ἄρσενοκοῖται* reflects, I think, both Leviticus and the common designation of the passive partner in such relations as being effeminate, something shameful for a man. Most non-Jewish writers abhorred the prospect of man acting as women. Paul, informed by his Jewish heritage, abhors both. I am not convinced that the primary reference is male prostitution or pederasty, though they surely would have been in view.

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 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 "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 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, but not something of their doing, but God's) or that just as with God they deliberately denied their heterosexuality and chose to lust after those of their own sex. The latter is more plausible. This is not about the fall, but about the consequences of idolatry, 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).

If this exegesis is correct, then it shows us Paul condemning both homosexual acts and attitudes. I see no reason to limit it to pederasty or prostitution nor to see here a reference to female bestiality rather than lesbian relations. While feeling under no obligation to do so, I nevertheless find myself assenting to Paul's argument at least in the sense that homosexual acts and attitudes which result from the choice to deny one's nature do represent perversion. I have been persuaded however that there are people whose homosexuality is not to be explained by such perversion. At this point the argument could go in another direction with an appeal to created order and thus to Genesis 1 – 2. I am fairly confident that Paul would agree. For we should expect him like other Jewish writers to assume that all are by nature heterosexual - that is crucial to his argument – and that God made them so, male and female.

I believe 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 accounts, too, present us with a complex array of choices, many of which we have long since made, but 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 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 we 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.

In encountering these profound myths of creation I do not conclude that they say all there is to say about the nature of human sexuality (or creation, for that matter) in the sense that I should agree with what would almost certainly have been Paul's understanding, namely that God made people male and female and that therefore we cannot accept that anyone with a homosexual orientation is other than a person who is culpable of denying his or her nature. I am not sure why people seem to think that we should still assume that Genesis 1 – 2 tells the whole story or treat it as doing so. I do not share a view of scripture which can privilege such passages as inerrant and so exempt from critical inquiry. This puts an enormous strain on the text, but also on our own integrity, something we do not compromise with other parts of the pentateuch, such as Leviticus 18 – 20, or even parts of these Genesis texts. To argue that it has special status because Jesus cited it 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.

I can, however, understand that many do see Gen 2:20-24 as prescriptive in an exclusive sense. I respect that choice, but believe it is not a choice we need to make. Our choices constitute our hermeneutics. Such choices are not an invention of the so-called Enlightenment. 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.

Homosexuals and Gentiles are hardly to be put in the same category, though, like many to whom Jesus related in controversial circumstances, many are marginalised. On the other hand, people arguing that these people's sexuality should be respected as we respect that of heterosexuals with no further restrictions, do operate with a hermeneutic which operates similarly to that of Jesus, Paul, and Mark. Citing the biblical texts to counter such a hermeneutic similarly could, indeed, put one

unwittingly in the wrong first century company, including among those who already charged Paul with just seeking to placate the people of his day. On the other hand I think such a hermeneutic, applied to attitudes towards homosexual people, is only as strong as its assumptions and collapses if it rests on a misconstrual of reality, especially if with Paul we espouse the view that homosexual orientation is a choice or a pathology to be approached equally with compassion and which will not be helped if we deny it as such.

This leaves us in a difficult situation. We have to take responsibility for the hermeneutical choices we regularly have to make in using scripture. There are no valid shortcuts. I see the variable in our hermeneutical choices lying less within scripture and more in our assessment of what is going on when people have a homosexual orientation. Here we lack sufficient proof either way in terms of the concrete measures of science: to say that there are or there are not such people and that they are to be seen as needing help and support to change or to live out their lives responsibly. Despite this impasse I find it impossible to deny that there are many such people for whom this is their reality and whom I want to welcome and expect leadership from on the same basis as anyone else. But I know there are people coming from the same heart of biblical grace who would see this as failing such people and indeed blocking their path to potential recovery and return to heterosexuality. I want fellowship also with these people who see it differently and hope that we can be a church community where options can be worked out which will respect the differences and as far as is possible allow different spaces and places for the different possibilities.

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