

Human Sexuality and the New Testament

These studies look at four issues concerning sexuality as they are dealt with in the New Testament. The starting points are four main passages, but each study will also refer to related material outside those passages.

1. Matthew 5:21-30 – Sexual Desire
2. Matthew 19:3-9 – Marriage and Divorce
3. 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 – Marriage and Celibacy
4. Romans 1:16-32 – Same-Sex Relations

You can do all four studies or pick only those which interest you.



Each study asks you to read a passage from the New Testament, and offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question
- it is particularly important to respect that matters of sexuality can be very personal and that people will have limits and boundaries which others need to respect

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the passage and the commentary and then look at the questions *or* you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions *or* you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above *or* you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above.

... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Before we start:

Meet the World of the New Testament!

Theirs was a different world from ours. Fathers arranged marriages for their children because marriage partnerships affected the viability of the extended family. No room for dating. Most marriages were between a man of around thirty and a young woman in her teens. In Jewish contexts it was preferable to marry within the extended family, not least because property then remained under its control. Most people were married. Men dominated public life. Women managed the internal affairs of the household. Bearing children was one of their main roles. Many died in childbirth, estimated as half of them before they reached 30. On the basis that their wives were less experienced and less mature, men generally drew the fallacious and fateful conclusion that women were by nature inferior to men, a notion from which we are still trying to recover.

Households were the key to survival – for dealing with sustenance, sickness, and aged care. Adultery was a threat to the household because it affected everyone's welfare. In all societies of that world it was not only forbidden, but also required dissolution of the marriage, namely divorce – no reconciliation counselling! Fathers strictly controlled daughters because it was difficult to marry off a girl who had shown herself unwilling to control her sexuality; for she might behave similarly when married. In the non-Jewish world prostitution was not uncommon, including male prostitution and pederasty. In that world there were also teachers who advocated strict control over emotions, even to the extent of seeing sexual passion as best suppressed altogether. Jews generally had a positive attitude towards sexual passion as God's creation and saw marriage as the place for its fulfilment. Rape, including male rape, was common in conquests and in abuse of prisoners. While incest was broadly condemned, the male head of the household otherwise had sexual rights not only over his wife but also over his slaves (but not the slaves of another man's house).

The material for these studies derives in part from research I undertook over 5 years, 2005-2010 funded by the Australian Research Council with a fulltime Professorial Fellowship. My website lists the publications of this research in five volumes, as well as a short summary volume written for a wider readership, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

For further detail, including of on-line papers, see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher.

The pics are Bill's own:

A sculpture in Christchurch, NZ

Happy couple, Hungary

Bill and Gisela 1966 when the wind caught the veil and the cat pounced on it

Sculpture in Zwinger Palace grounds, Dresden, Germany

Session One

Sexual Desire – Matthew 5:21-30

While the focus of this study is sexual desire, it is helpful that our passages begins with a look at another strong desire or passion, that of anger. Matthew presents Jesus as giving instruction about key biblical commandments and one of them is: “You shall not kill.” Jesus stands in the best of Jewish tradition in focusing not just on the act of killing but on the attitude of hate.

At one level anger is simply an emotional response, usually to hurt or fear. In itself, like other feelings, what matters is what we do with it. We can respond to it positively by noting that we are annoyed and make decisions about what to do about it. Jesus was angry, for instance, with religious authorities who seemed resistant to change or to compassion. But we can also harbour anger’s energy and let it turn into hate and wanting to hurt. Even more dangerous, we can swallow it, perhaps even pretending we are not angry, and our anger either depresses us like a heavy weight on the mind or we bottle it up till it explodes and our responses are then out of all proportion the next time we face a situation of hurt or anger.

Hate must have no place in human relations. Writing people off has no place. So in our passage Matthew shows Jesus encouraging people to sort out their conflicts, not to damn those who hurt us with abusive words and behaviour. Later in chapter 5 he will come back to the theme and challenge people to give up retaliation and hating people, including enemies. God is loving and that’s how we should be and the more we let ourselves experience that, the more we will be willing not only not to hate, but also to be generous and giving towards others.

Adultery is the next commandment Jesus addresses and again it is about how we handle our feelings. Sexual feelings like the feelings of anger and even of hunger are neither right nor wrong in themselves. It is all a matter of what we do with them. If we misdirect our sexual feelings, then that can be damaging and even abusive. Jesus’ first statement can be read in a way that itself is dangerous and damaging. For people have read it as saying that if a man looks at a woman and as a result has sexual feelings then he has committed adultery with her in his mind and so is an adulterer. Read in that way it implies that sexual feelings are already sinful. Women, some men concluded, are therefore dangerous for men, and so must be controlled and covered up.

There are clear signs that this is a misreading. To begin with, adultery assumes that the man is not looking at any woman, but at another man’s wife. But, more seriously, the Greek almost certainly means that the issue is not about a man looking at someone’s wife and finding her sexually attractive, but about looking at her with a view to wanting to have sexual relations with her. To lust after another man’s wife is, argues Jesus, to commit adultery in your mind.



The message is: don’t just focus on acts, focus on attitudes. Having sexual feelings in response to someone who is sexually attractive, finding someone sexually attractive, is a natural response. Like anger, feelings are not in themselves evil. It is what you do with them that matters. So the issue is not about women being dangerous for men, nor men being dangerous for women, but men and

women taking responsibility for what they do with their sexual desires. So the same applies as with anger, and also at a practical level with the desire for food. Desires are not bad in themselves. They are natural, but they need to be managed.

Men's misuse of sexual desire was obviously a problem which needed to be confronted and still is. This accounts for the dramatic statement which follows. Cut off your hand, cut off your leg, pluck out your eye – if that's what it takes to get yourself under control. The language is deliberately shocking and not meant to be taken literally, although in history some did and thus castrated themselves.

Matthew's concern with harmful sexual behaviour returns in Matthew 18, where we again find the same extreme language. Read the passage, 18:6-9. Here Matthew has Jesus repeat his warning about sexual misbehaviour but now in relation to how people respond to children. He has just taken a child as a model of discipleship in 18:1-5, where the emphasis is on childlike faith and love rather than making oneself powerful and important.

While it is possible that Matthew is thinking of all believers, including adult ones, as children, and of any kind of abuse, it is much more likely that he means sexual abuse. That is why he repeats the same stark warnings about cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes that he used earlier in warning about sexual sin. Causing someone to stumble is also language used elsewhere for sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse of minors was widespread in the Roman empire, so that it comes as no surprise that it is being addressed and that these warnings go back to Jesus, himself. Extreme language is used: hanging a millstone around your neck and jumping into the sea – drowning yourself! Again, this is not meant literally, but shows how seriously this kind of abuse was viewed. Sadly such abuse keeps happening right through to our own times, even within church institutions. Children need protection. They need a safe place.

Sexual exploitation and sexual violation of any kind against anyone is an assault on their dignity. It is unhelpful when the church has taught or implied that sex is sinful or something to be ashamed of, because like suppressed anger, sexual desire will press to find a way out and can explode into obsessive and rash responses which do enormous harm.

We do best to help people to affirm their sexual desires, to value them as part of God's creation, but to encourage them to find expression for them in loving and respectful relationships. Finding expression is not just about acts, just as the warning about murder is to be seen as not just about the act of killing but as covering a range of violent behaviours. Respect and love, rather than harassment and abuse, need to inform also the whole rich range of ways in which we express our sexuality – from attitudes, conversation, touch, through to sexual union. At every point love and respect need to be foremost. This is therefore about much more than not doing wrong. It is about doing all in the spirit of love, as Matthew has Jesus sum up the biblical commandments in the concluding chapter of the Sermon on the Mount: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (7:12).

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why is it not enough just to tell people to keep the commandments and not do wrong?
3. In what ways do you think we can help people value their sexuality and not misuse it?

Session Two

Marriage and Divorce – Matthew 19:3-9

Jesus' statements about marriage come incidentally in his answer to a question about divorce. Our passage is from Matthew, who, for the most part, follows Mark, his source (Mark 10:2-12). As in Mark, in Matthew's version some Pharisees asked Jesus whether divorce was permissible. Matthew adds "for any reason" to the question because Matthew will later show that Jesus does allow that there can be a reason for divorce.

There is a background to the issue of divorce, which had become important in Jesus' day, hence the question. Jews had been abandoning the practice of men having many wives, polygyny, such as we see with Abraham and Jacob and with David and Solomon. That abandonment created a problem. In days when polygyny was the norm the solution to a man's being dissatisfied with his wife was to take another one and that could go on to be more than two! Once Jews abandoned polygyny, the option of taking another wife disappeared. The only option left was divorce. That was more radical. Could one divorce one's wife simply for bad cooking, as some argued, or did there need to be a much more serious ground?

Adultery was not originally a ground for divorce because under Jewish law adulterers were to be put to death. That changed however by Jesus' time when Jews were forbidden by the Romans to carry out the death penalty. Thus the only option left was divorce. Indeed both in Roman and in Jewish law divorce was required after adultery. Under Roman law a man could be prosecuted if he failed to divorce his wife if she had committed adultery. In the story of Mary and Joseph, Joseph at first believes that Mary has slept with another man. As this was the equivalent of adultery – even though they were only betrothed, he knew he had to divorce her. He had no option (Matthew 1:18-19).

It is not hard to imagine that opinions varied widely in Jesus' day over what were sufficient grounds for divorce. Jesus' response in Matthew is to begin by directing his questioners back to what God intended in creation and here is where we find information about his understanding marriage, which he shared with many Jews of his day. God created people male and female (Genesis 1:27) and intended that they come together in marriage through sexual union and become one flesh, one kin (Genesis 2:24). This reflects a very positive understanding of marriage and sexual union.

Jesus concludes: "What God therefore has yoked together, let no human being separate!" (19:6). This does not mean that God does an act of joining people every time a couple marries. Rather it means that the act of sexual intercourse which joins people together is something God intended from the beginning.

Matthew then has the Pharisees ask why Moses allowed divorce and told people in doing so to provide a certificate of divorce which freed them to remarry. They were referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The reference to divorce on grounds of "something objectionable" and the issuing of a certificate comes only incidentally in a discussion about whether it might ever be permissible to take a divorced wife back again who had married someone else, been divorced again and then wanted to return.



The answer was: no. It was a general rule that sleeping with someone else broke the original bond forever. This incidental reference to divorce came, however, to be the main source for discussing it.

Mark had a different order. He had Jesus talk about Deuteronomy first before pointing to Genesis, but both bring Jesus' comment that Moses only permitted divorce because of human hardness of heart, the implication being that it was never meant to be. In Mark that ends the conversation. Later Jesus spells out the implications to his disciples on their own: there must be no divorce, and there could be no remarriage, because it would amount to adultery since the original marriage remains intact (10:10-12). Mark has Jesus apply this also to women because Roman law allowed women to initiate divorce.

Matthew, instead, has Jesus spell out these implications to everyone and in doing so restricts his comments to men, who were the main initiators in Jewish culture, and he also has Jesus add an exception. This picks up his additional words from earlier, "for any reason", and also recalls the reference in Deuteronomy which speaks of a man divorcing his wife for "something objectionable". There was much debate about what could be meant by "something objectionable".

Jesus, however, does not join that debate, but instead simply declares that the only exception is "adultery", not, in any case, envisaged in Deuteronomy, for originally adultery was a capital offence. The word Matthew uses refers broadly to sexual immorality, but is best understood here in the narrower sense as adultery. Some suggest that Matthew was thereby softening Jesus' original absolute prohibition which on the surface of it allowed no exceptions, but that would have been rather uncharacteristic of Matthew, who tends to make laws stricter.

It is more likely that Matthew was simply spelling out what the original prohibition also presupposed, namely what Jewish and Roman law required: divorce where adultery had taken place. Behind this was the notion that sexual union with another person fractured the previous union. It broke the marriage and so divorce must follow. Paul even used this notion symbolically to argue that sex with a prostitute similarly breaks our bond with Christ.

We find Jesus' prohibitions of divorce referred to not only in this passage in Matthew, following Mark, but also where Matthew and Luke have used their common source, called "Q" and perhaps Matthew even had a third source (Matt 5:32; Luke 16:18). The earliest record of the prohibition is when Paul quotes it in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, and Paul then goes on to allow divorce where, in a mixed marriage, an unbelieving partner demands it. The prohibition steered against a callous use of divorce which frequently left women in a parlous state.

Over the centuries the prohibition has been taken as an inflexible rule, leading sometimes to desperate attempts to release people from marriages by trying to prove they never had a proper marriage in the first place. In more recent times, however, the compassion at the heart of the gospel has led many to treat the prohibition in the way that Jesus and Paul handled biblical prohibitions in their day, namely to ask the question: what is in fact the most loving thing to do in this situation?

Domestic abuse, communication breakdown and irretrievable conflict, frequently make divorce the most caring way forward. And conversely, the same principle of care may in other situations enable reconciliation, including where there has been adultery and serious conflict. We no longer demand divorce where adultery has taken place, as they did. Ultimately what matters most is what best makes for wholeness and health for all concerned.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. They believed that adultery made divorce a must. What do you think? How does this relate to Jesus' teaching which focused on attitude not just act?
3. What observations do you have of others' or your own about divorce and remarriage which you would be happy to share with the group?

Marriage and Celibacy – 1 Corinthians 7:1-9

Paul's opening statement may come as a surprise. "It is good for man not to touch (= have sexual relations with) a woman." He is responding to issues raised by the Corinthians in a letter. Does he really mean that or is he quoting their letter. Almost certainly he does mean it, as the rest of his writings, including this chapter, show. Indeed, it is probable that he makes the statement because he had made it in Corinth and it had caused confusion. It still does!

Does Paul see sex as sin? Clearly not, because he will go on to say that when a couple finds that the passion between them is strong, then getting married is not a sin. "It is better to marry than to burn" with passion and find it hard to cope with (7:9). Similarly in 7:28 he twice underlines that it is not a sin to marry and repeats this in 7:36 about fathers marrying off their daughters.

Why then does Paul say here and in 7:7-8, that it is preferable not to marry and be single as he is? The answer is threefold. Some, Paul included, saw getting married and having family as a distraction from giving all your attention to ministry or mission. In 7:32 he says that he wants people to be unencumbered. The second reason is that Paul, and, it appears, the first followers of Jesus, believed that the life to come would take a form where marriage and sexual relations would have no place. It would be a different kind of existence and it would be holy space, indeed the sanctuary of heaven which is holy and Jews always banned sexual relations in the temple precincts. The third reason was that Paul thought that, in any case, history would soon cease to be, because Jesus would return and that new age would begin. There's no point in getting married. Stay the way you are!

Just after the passage from Matthew which we considered in the previous study Matthew has a conversation between Jesus and the disciples where they seem somewhat depressed about issue of marriage and divorce and think that it may be best to give it away (19:10-12). Take a moment to read it. Jesus' response to the disciples is to use the imagery of eunuchs, men who are impotent. He reflects the view of the time that some men are impotent from birth – possibly having in mind some who are born intersex, that is, with sexual genitalia which are mixed up of male and female parts. Then he mentions men whom others had castrated. And finally he gets to the point by saying: some see it as their calling to choose to be celibate, in that sense to be voluntary eunuchs. It was rather a daring image because people often looked down on eunuchs. It is interesting that here Jesus immediately adds that this was not for everyone.

Paul does something similar in 7:7, where, he, too, emphasises that only some will see this as their calling. He is one of them, as were John the Baptist and Jesus. It seems likely that some at Corinth believed that a true believer should also be celibate and try to live in the present as people will in the age to come. Paul does not back off from his preference, but has to counter their negative attitude toward sex and marriage. The person who marries is not a second class believer. Marriage and sexual relations were after all part of God's creation. As a Jew Paul would have no doubts about that.

There are some other pieces of evidence about the views early Christians about the life to come. For instance, in the Book of Revelation the 144,000 are those who have not engaged in sexual relations with women. Literally "who had not defiled themselves with women" (14:4). Defilement in this context is not a moral but a ritual category and means rendered for a time not allowed to enter

temple precincts. This applied to men after seminal emission, women menstruating or after childbirth, people who had touched a corpse, etc. These 144,00 (Rev 7:4-8) will then be joined by thousands of others who at that point would also become celibate (Rev 7:9).

It is not hard to understand how some Corinthians reached their dangerous conclusions. For surely if the ideal state of the future is sexless, then sex and marriage must be less than ideal. As long as biblical values about creation prevailed this could be held off, but when Christianity moved out of the Jewish sphere, such negative notions reasserted themselves. Some even began to see salvation as the soul being saved from the body and the body as something evil in itself, especially its sexual side. Inevitably some began to think of a two tier system of being a Christian. Perfect Christian did not marry. Some popular Greek philosophies also downgraded sex – never let yourself go! Notions of sex and impurity played into the decision 1000 years later that all Catholic priests should be celibate and it is not so long ago that some ministers felt that they should abstain from sexual intercourse the night before they were to preach.

The sense of sacred space as requiring such ritual purity also explains Paul's statement in 7:5 that for periods of prayer (when in his mind they enter holy space) couples may abstain from sexual intercourse. Paul's main concern is, however, to say, even if you do this, do not abstain for too long. Come back together again. It is striking that in this passage Paul represents the best wisdom of his day in saying that marriage is about mutual consent, not domination by the man, and that in this sense both own the other and need to show respect and compassion. Paul's later comments show that he assumes that marriage is about showing love and care.

Some have read Paul's words as only valuing marriage as a way to keep people from being sexually promiscuous. The previous chapter certainly shows that he was concerned that some male believers at Corinth had not yet come to see that visiting prostitutes and so-called loose women was not compatible with being joined to Christ. However Paul's comments about mutuality and, by implication, love show that his view of marriage is not so negative.



We live in a different world from Paul. He believed history would reach its climax and Jesus would return in his lifetime. It did not happen. We may also imagine life beyond death in terms other than being in a temple. We also have very different notions of marriage. We choose our own partners. Fathers do not choose them for us. We also no longer share Paul's ideas about ritual purity.

We have also come to see the choice of celibacy differently, sometimes as appropriate, but also indeed as potentially dangerous when imposed. We have even come to realise that sometimes the settled married person may have just as much energy and attention to give as someone who is single. We embrace diversity.

We do share in common the beliefs that sex and marriage are part of our being human as God made us and we share Paul's best thoughts about mutuality, respect and love. And while no longer having grounds for seeing singleness as the preferred option, we affirm, like Paul, that people are different

and that making responsible decisions about our sexuality and how we express it is something healthy not something shameful, let alone sinful, whether we choose singleness or partnership. Indeed, our understanding of what makes relationships work is best when it is bathed in the compassion which is at the heart of the gospel.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What do you think are potential strengths and weaknesses in Paul's comment in 7:3-4?
"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does".
3. In what ways do you think being married helps or hinders our engagement in Christian living and service in the world?

Same-Sex Relations – Romans 1:16-32

Apart from some single word references in lists which occur in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and in 1 Timothy 1:9-10, this passage is the only one which specifically mentions same-sex relations. Paul is not introducing a topic that would have been unfamiliar to the believers in Rome to whom he is writing. Quite the contrary, he was well aware that deploring same-sex relations in the pagan world was one of the main ways in which his fellow Jews differentiated themselves from that world.

They would have been familiar with the kinds of activity that went on in drunken parties and in brothels where slaves would be forced to satisfy the sexual gratification of their owners. The Roman believers were probably also aware of some of the same kinds of behaviours for which the imperial household in Rome had become notorious, especially during the rule of Caligula and Nero. Whether as exploitation of minors or as male adult to adult relations – and sometimes the female equivalent – same-sex relations were high on the agenda of what Jews condemned.

Jews were not alone in this. Some Greek philosophers like Plato strongly disapproved of the sexualisation of the mentoring relationships between pubescent boys and older men, their mentors, which were common in some Greek states. Plato and others marshalled a range of arguments against such same-sex relations, including that, if allowed to run rife, it would depopulate cities, men would run out of semen, and with that run out of male strength and courage. Notions of male pride meant it was seen as shameful for a man to take a woman's role, an inferior position. Rome forbade such activities between its citizens, though allowed it with inferiors like foreigners and slaves where it could go on for life. In contrast Greek homosexual practices when approved were to cease once a man reached 30, the age when he should marry.



Paul's few comments in this passage share such disapproval, but in a way that was typical of Paul. They go more deeply into the issue by not only deploring the activities but also the state of mind which produces them. The state of a renewed mind produces the fruit of goodness (Romans 12:2). The state of a mind alienated from God produces sin as its fruit. This is why Paul, in this passage, deploras not only the acts but the attitudes, the passions themselves as misdirected, and the state of mind which he describes as corrupted, "darkened" (1:21) and "unfit" (1:28) minds.

The foundation for Paul's stance lies in his understanding of human nature. Human nature is perverted when it orients itself not towards the opposite sex in its attitudes and actions but towards its own. To act contrary to nature is to act contrary to how God created human beings. Like other Jews of his time who wrote on such issues the fundamental starting point is the story of creation where in Genesis 1:27 we read that God created humans as male and female, not male and female and gay. Their shared assumption was that all people are heterosexual and that anything else is a perversion of God's creation.

There were some in Paul's world who had argued that some people were naturally gay. Plato has one of his characters in the *Symposium*, a fictional dialogue, put forward the following theory. People were once male, female and a mixture of both. When they offended Zeus, he cut them in half and ever since the halves have been seeking each other: males, males; females, females; and males, females and vice versa from the mixed person. Philo, a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria and contemporary of Paul cites this story and debunks it in the light of Genesis.

Paul, Philo, and others focused mainly on male-male same-sex relations. Female same-sex relations were also known and much more widely disapproved of in society. One reason was that men considered it totally unacceptable for a woman to play the role of a male, since they saw themselves as superior to women. For the same reason in male same-sex relations they deplored the notion of a man lowering himself to play what they saw as the passive inferior role of a female. Some question whether Paul is referring to lesbian relations in this passage. They suggest that he may have other activities in mind such as bestiality, oral or anal sex, or sex during menstruation. Prohibition of the latter happens to occur in the same context in Leviticus as prohibition of male anal intercourse (18:19, 22). The way Paul connects what he writes about women's unnatural sex to the statements about male same-sex relations as unnatural, namely by using the word "likewise", makes a reference to lesbian activity much more likely.

Paul brings this short excursion about same-sex relations as part of his attempt to find common ground with those who would be listening to his letter. He knew they would all agree. In some sense he is softening them up for the stark challenge he brings in the following chapter where he virtually says: we may deplore this evil, but when we as Jews sin we are also no better. Both Jews and non-Jews need the transformation Christ brings and he is, as he already says in 1:16, not ashamed to preach this. Paul is hoping that he will be welcomed when he travels to Rome as a staging point for his intended mission to Spain.

The passage has been a source of controversy, especially since there has been a growing realisation, reflected not only in the public mind and media but also in government legislation, that there are some people who are genuinely gay and that not all gay people are like the ones Paul speaks of. Some, sensing the tension, try to explain away the harshness of what Paul says, claiming that he is referring only to sexual exploitation of minors or sex acts in specific places like pagan temples. Others similarly try to argue that Paul is happy about people being gay as long as they are celibate and objects only when they act on their sexual desires.

It has more integrity to respect what Paul says and why he says it and not to try to water it down, but at the same time to recognise that people now, with very good reason, no longer share the assumption of Paul and Jews of his day that all human beings are heterosexual. In the mammal kingdom we find a small percentage of animals are naturally that way and we are now more aware that not everyone is born with unambiguously male or female genitals. It now seems well established that it really does happen that one's outward genitals may not match one's inner sexual orientation. Increasingly we find parents of such people telling us that this is something they had observed in them from the very beginning of their development.

Some choose to stick with Paul's assumptions and reinforce them by the prohibitions of anal intercourse in Leviticus, or at least remain fixed on forbidding the act while accepting being gay as not sinful in itself. Increasingly, others, while respecting Paul and why he said what he did, nevertheless acknowledge that there is more to be said and known than what was known to Paul.

They affirm that there are people who are naturally gay and argue that they should have the right like heterosexual people to give expression to their sexuality responsibly, including to marry. They have also come therefore to realise that our attitudes and behaviours towards gay people in the past have often caused them unnecessary hurt and pain. Fine upstanding leaders in our community who are gay have helped persuade many that we should be more open.

The challenge is to live by compassion that is informed by new knowledge and inspired by the message of love which is at the heart of the gospel. That will of course also include how we respond to people who hold different points of view to our own.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. In the light of your own experience and observations, how do approach the assumption of Paul and others of his time that all people are heterosexual?
3. Do you have stories to tell of helpful encounters with others over the issue of how best to respond to these issues? What is most helpful? What is least helpful?