



What does the Bible say on Homosexuality?

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While this article was written to help people in the Uniting Church in Australia as they discuss whether people with an open homosexual orientation should be ordained into the ministry, Bill Loader gives us, in the Church of Scotland, an interesting reflection on this important issue.

In the current discussions about homosexuality, some issues should be clear from the start. One is that the Bible roundly condemns homosexuality and homosexual activity. Of this there is not a shadow of doubt. Its writers deplored homosexual acts as a deliberate perversion of human nature, a flouting of God's intention in creation. Genesis 19:4-11 reports the horrific story of male rape and later generations saw the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as God's judgement on such activity (Jude 7). Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 clearly prohibit homosexual acts and Paul highlights them as manifestations of perversion (Romans 1:26-27). Christians in New Testament times shared with Jews a strong abhorrence both for homosexual acts among adults and for the widespread practice in the Greco-Roman world of sexually exploiting young boys.

On the basis of these facts about the Bible and the Church's commitment to the witness of the Scriptures one might wonder why the issue of homosexuality should ever be raised. Together with the fact that many heterosexual people feel repulsed by acts which run so contrary to their own nature, it is not hard to understand that many people see the debate as a non event or as something which should be a non event. Is it not doubly perverse to propose that we bless acts which deliberately pervert God's created order?

The trouble is that there have been a number of mature and respected people, including many deeply committed Christians, who have been telling us that they are homosexual and that the last thing on their minds has been to pervert God's will. By this they mean that their natural sexual orientation is towards people of the same sex and not to those of the opposite sex and that they have been this way for as long as they can remember. Some of them have undertaken extensive measures to try to reverse their orientation but without avail. Many have lived through deep guilt and shame as well as prejudice and

sometimes violence against their person in the process. They are people of great integrity who abhor all forms of perversion and exploitation. Most have come to the conclusion, often after years of struggle and discrimination, that they need to accept themselves as they are. This has been happening at a time when scientific research has also been acknowledging the reality that such different sexual orientation does exist in the human species and is seeking to identify the way it may be traced in a person's physical and psychological make up.

When we turn back to the Bible we must ask the question: were the writers of the Bible aware of such people? The answer is fairly clearly: no. The Bible was attacking deliberate perversion and therefore its writers understood the phenomenon of homosexuality as a manifestation of sin. That was the basis for the strong statements of condemnation. This makes it difficult simply to take over their statements and apply them to everyone who has a homosexual orientation. The potential is there to do a terrible injustice to those people who find themselves genuinely homosexual. It would represent an inappropriate use of scripture because these were not the people which the scripture had in mind.

Does this mean we should abandon the Bible's teaching for their sake? Clearly this would be to betray the foundation of our faith. Rather we need to hear the rest of what the Bible has to say. Right at the heart of its message is God's compassion and love. That love strongly confronts sin and corruption, but never condemns or discriminates against people because of such things as age, ability, gender or race. It never condemns people, when they cannot help but be the way they are. On the contrary, it challenges us to abandon such discrimination. If, for these people, being homosexual is not a perversion, but simply the way some people are, then to discriminate against them or condemn them on that basis is to contradict the heart of the gospel message. In other words, if we are not careful we can end up using the Bible in ways that contradict the heart of its message.

But is it really true that some people are naturally homosexual? That is the key question which determines how we apply the Scripture. Few in previous generations faced this question. All who wrote and first heard the Bible simply assumed the answer was: no. The answer now appears to be: yes. At least it has become a matter of debate and that means we run the risk of doing a lot of harm if we assume we know the answer without adequate evidence. The onus of proof must be on those who claim that all homosexuality is perversion, because only then could it be responsible to apply the biblical condemnations.

But does this mean all homosexual activities are to be blessed as innocent? Surely not? For a start, there are doubtless many instances of deliberate perversion today as there were in biblical times. We can all agree that to pervert God's will is sin. Similarly all agree that exploitation of minors, rape, and sexual abuse are violations of other human beings and should never be tolerated. The same applies with heterosexuality. This is so because our sexuality is a natural part of our being, whatever its orientation, and therefore it can be used healthily or unhealthily, destructively or creatively.

What if some people are genuinely homosexual, as appears to be the case? Some people would argue they should nevertheless abstain from all sexual activity. Part of the reason for this is that many heterosexual people find even the thought of homosexual activity abhorrent. That is in part because it runs contrary to his or her own natural orientation at a gut level. But is it fair to insist that homosexual people not give expression to their sexuality at all? We are not talking about their expressing it in ways that are destructive and exploitative, but in ways that are responsible and express genuine affection and human love.

But, we might ask, surely some forms of homosexual activity, even with the purest of intention and mutual love, are contrary to nature? Two males or two females cannot reproduce children, no matter how romantically tolerant we might want to be - that is reality! This is certainly true. Yet our values have changed. There was a day when many people believed that the only justification for sexual intercourse was producing children. We now recognise that reproduction of the species is only one aspect of sexual activity. There is much more to it. The unique thing about human beings is that they do not simply mate blindly to reproduce themselves like animals on the farm, but rather employ their sexuality as a medium of tenderness and affection. They fall in love, express their sexuality in a variety of ways, sometimes just in a look, sometimes only in words, sometimes in mutual touching and physical intimacy. This is part of being human. It is about much more than the propagation of the species. Why try to exclude people with homosexual orientation from this aspect of their humanity?

When we turn to the Bible, we find two kinds of message and these match two kinds of approaches. One approach simply carries over into the present day every statement and applies it as a rule for today. It hears only one kind of message in the Bible, what is plainly stated on the surface. Another asks what is at the heart of the Scripture and what light that sheds on how we understand and interpret the statements of the Bible today.

Most people agree that some statements cannot simply be applied to today, because they depend on cultural values of biblical times and these have changed. Women no longer cover their heads in church, as Paul insisted they should. Slavery is no longer condoned, as in the call from Colossians that slaves obey their masters (3:22; also Ephesians 6:5). Similarly we have recognised equality between men and women that means we no longer apply the exhortation that women obey their husbands (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:22). There are many other instances where the heart of the Gospel and changing circumstances have overruled the literal application of biblical statements to the present day. Many of us have seen this in our own lifetime in relation to Sunday as the Sabbath day. Jesus and Paul faced the same kind of issue in their day. In the name of compassion they abandoned earlier statements of Scripture which discriminated against non Jews.

How do we decide which statements should still apply and which belong to the cultural values of the time? Is it a matter of dropping tradition just to follow new fashion? Many people fear this and so prefer to remain with what generations before them believed. There is a safety and wisdom in this. The Church must not chase the fashions; it must look to Jesus and to the heart of the Gospel. But this means airing the issues critically and asking: what does it mean to be faithful to the Scriptures in more than a superficial sense? It means doing so both in the light of what biblical writers meant and understood and assumed and in the light of present day understanding of the matters. We do this in the community of the Church, listening to our traditions and advisers, but above all to the people concerned. We need to do so with patience and goodwill, respecting that people may reach differing conclusions in the spirit of love and mutual respect.

Where, as in the issue of homosexuality, there is even the slightest indication of doubt about what homosexuality is, we need to exercise extreme caution that we do not espouse stances which may increase the injustice and hurt felt by many homosexual people. They will tell us they are not the people that the biblical writers were talking about, deliberate perverters of God's order. They are a genuine minority of human beings with a natural orientation towards people of the same sex who should be afforded the respect, tolerance and opportunities which all minorities deserve. In compassion for them we need to listen to all that the Spirit is saying to the churches through the witness of the Scripture in the face of new questions we cannot avoid.

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Bill is currently working on the project: "Attitudes towards Sexuality in Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman Era".

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