

## **Human sexuality discussion – an overview**

### **Intro**

This short paper is based on notes that I've used to lead discussions in church. It is not intended to be exhaustive but I hope it provides a useful background for our conversations. I have tried to include points that reflect a range of opinion but inevitably these are influenced by my own values and conclusions.

Whatever our views no one can doubt that this has been a big debate within the church and wider society over the last 2 or 3 decades. Richard Harris, then Bishop of Oxford, wrote in the Sunday Telegraph 28/9/03 that he believed the church would be forced to admit it had got it wrong. Instead of opposing change, he suggested, that the church should acknowledge its mistakes and become an inclusive institution, providing the best pastoral provision for people who are gay and lesbian. The church had got it wrong in the past and, he said, "I think you can take the view that, just as the church eventually abolished slavery, so they ended up in favour of votes for women and this is just one more issue where the Church has got it wrong".

### **Bible verses relating to homosexuality**

There are a limited number of verses that consider homosexuality. I have listed some key ones below along with general comments that, I hope, explain the debate within the church.

#### **Genesis 19:1-11.**

The question is what is the sin of Sodom?

Points to note:

- The context is about hospitality. Abraham had received the angelic visitation, the two angels then visit Sodom and Lot but how will they be received?
- In v4, every man was involved. The threat was a social sin rather than simply an individual act.
- Lot doesn't exactly show moral fibre, he offers his daughters instead!
- Elsewhere in Scripture (Ezekiel 16:49; Matthew 10:15) Sodom's sin is seen as being one of hospitality rather than primarily a sexual sin.

#### **Leviticus 18:22.**

The question is what is being condemned, why, and how (if at all) does it apply to us today?

Points to note:

- Context is about Israel not being like the Canaanites and therefore not copying the various acts associated with Canaanite ritual: child sacrifice, homosexual sex, bestiality.
- A similar point is made in Leviticus 20:13, which makes a similar point within a discussion of purity.
- It is acts that are prohibited; nothing is said about homosexual motivation or orientation.
- Our reading of these texts needs to be consistent with the way we read the law generally. Why might we be inclined to view Lev 18:22 as applying to today when we don't do the same for Lev 19:19?

#### **Romans 1:16-32.**

The question is what is Paul's main argument and how does homosexuality fit into it?

These have been the most hotly contested verses in the debate. It is impossible to reduce this down to a series of bullet points not least because different readings of Romans understand the function of this passage differently.

1. Perhaps Paul's aim in this passage is to show how fallen humanity has rebelled against the creator; showing their unrighteousness in the face of God's righteousness. Paul uses standard Hellenistic / Jewish cultural descriptions and categories. He uses homosexuality as an example of distortion from God's plan, of the fallen condition of the world; not because it is any worse than other sin. Thus v16/17 show how the gospel is an active manifestation of God's power; it is the instrument through which God is working his purpose out in the world. Through it God is revealing his righteousness. By contrast in v18ff the gospel reveals God's righteousness, and thereby also God's wrath against the unrighteousness of humankind leading Paul to then condemn the unrighteousness of fallen humanity. Humanity has turned from worship to idolatry. In his wrath God gives humanity the freedom to go its own way. Their passions lead them into actions that make them less than human (v26 degrading passions). They therefore receive the penalty for their error. (Homosexuality is the punishment, not something that will incur a punishment.)

2. Perhaps this is a sting operation. For the Jewish reader this section would provoke agreement with Paul about the state of the world today; the sting comes in 2:1 when Paul turns on them and says you have no reason for gloating either! Indeed he will go on to say that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (3:23). His prime argument is not about homosexuality, it is like a politician caricaturing to get people to agree with him.
3. Perhaps, for Paul, salvation is not dependant either on seeking to observe the law or attempting to be a pious pagan. Rather the rhetorical effect of Romans 1:18-3:25 should be to remind us that judgementalism and works based piety win no favours with God. Therefore to use the Romans passage either to pass judgement on homosexual people or to exclude homosexual Christians is a denial of the gospel Paul preaches. On the contrary the grace of God is that all who are baptised into Christ have become part of a community in which the old divisions have been superseded (Gal 3:26ff).

Some affirming Christian groups have also pointed to the way:

1. Paul uses the idea of exchange, arguing that homosexuals are not being natural to themselves. But gay people are being natural.
2. Paul writing against a very different cultural background to ours where homosexuality is viewed differently. He is simply using accepted categories for effect.

But there are other questions that have been raised:

1. About Romans 1:26. Nowhere in ancient literature is 'natural use' used for lesbian sex, but rather Paul is referring to inordinate desire with women using men. The ancients had a word for correct use and that's what Paul uses here; ergo what Paul is describing is not homosexual sex but inordinate desire and the loss of self-control.
2. Paul talks about things being contrary to God's nature, but this is exactly what he does in 11:24 when he talks of gentiles been grafted in.
3. It is also suggested that what Paul is setting out in this passage is what his opponents are saying, in order to demolish the argument later in the Epistle.
4. The cultural context of the day included lots of bi-sexuality: masters dominated slaves and often expressed this through sexual dominance – the liberation of the gospel is the freedom from exploitation.

### **1 Corinthians 6:9-12**

Paul's main argument here is to contrast the Christians' old way of life with the new life they have in Christ; homosexuality was not the key thrust of Paul's argument. Rather his aim was to encourage them to live out the Christian life.

Greek culture was reputed to be promiscuous; a common Greek view was, "mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body and wives to bear us legitimate children". Hence Paul's references here to adultery (sexual relations outside marriage) as well as homosexuality.

The two words used here were:

- Malakoi - literally "soft" the term was used in a way similar to "rent boy". They were young boys who were used as prostitutes, the most common form of homosexuality at the time.
- Arsenokoitai – not an easy word to translate but a compound word made up of male and intercourse. Not widely used in Greek literature so harder to be precise about its meaning. It could refer to those who use male prostitutes, or it could refer to homosexuality more widely

Although it is clear in this passage that Paul is against prostitution and promiscuity do these verses prohibit loving, faithful, homosexual relationships? Particularly since such relationships were unlikely to have been on Paul's mind.

### **1 Tim 1:8-11**

Here again the word used is arsenokoitai. Again the question is what sort of things are being condemned? NIV simply translates this as perversion.

### **Jude 7**

This occurs in an argument about false teachers. Jude gives examples of ungodliness that are subject to judgement.

1. Israel's lack of faith.
2. The angels of Gen 6:1-4 who left heaven to engage in sexual union with humans.

3. Sodom and Gomorrah who “in the same manner, indulged in sexual immorality and went after other flesh”. Thus the sin was to seek out sexual relations with angels.

### **Questions to think through**

Does Scripture condemn homosexuality? If so what forms does it condemn?

Might there be a place for loving, committed, faithful, homosexual partnerships?

How important is the cultural background to these verses in our understanding of them and their application to us today?

**Have we misunderstood Scripture?** The charge is made that the church has got it wrong in the same way as it got it wrong about slavery and women in ministry; our reading of the Bible is coloured by our own assumptions and we have missed the point. A number of senior Church of England Bishops would appear to take this line. This is a challenge to listen carefully to the Bible and to engage in the debate with humility.

### **Wider Context**

As well as looking at verses that specifically mention homosexuality we also need to set the debate within a wider context. The danger for all such attempts is that they are self selective and, in this context, liable to downplay verses which speak of God's love and justice or God's desire for inclusion in favour of verses which talk more narrowly about sexuality.

### **God's creation intention: Genesis ch1 & 2.**

These chapters suggest that God had a plan for humanity. He created gender and intended that humanity be fruitful and multiply. Adam and Eve provide an example of God's plan for marriage with the reference to leaving, cleaving and becoming one flesh. Thus marriage becomes the appropriate place for sexual expression and intimacy.

If this is the case then all other expressions are less than God's ideal: Cohabitation, casual sex, and homosexuality.

But because these passages are so general we must be careful in making sweeping generalisations. For example, just because heterosexual marriage would seem to be implied as the norm, does this mean that every person should get married or that homosexual marriage is therefore rejected.

Furthermore is sex primarily about bonding or babies? The Roman Catholic position (as identified in Veritas Splendour) suggests that sex, as illustrated in Gen 1 & 2, is about procreation. Hence the view that contraception is improper. But if sex is not about procreation but about intimacy then what is wrong with homosexual marriage?

### **Jesus teaching:**

#### **Matthew 19**

Jesus uses Genesis as the basis for his views about marriage using it to explain God's best intention, over against the Torah's acceptance of the realities of life, and over against the patriarchal culture of his day. In reply to the disciples concern he notes that some renounce marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Is this what God is calling homosexuals to do?

#### **Luke 20**

Here Jesus suggests that marrying and being given in marriage are specific gender roles that are an aspect of creation that is not to be continued in heaven.

### **Paul:**

Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 7 both affirms mutuality and sexual expression in marriage and encourages celibacy. Paul's preference is undoubtedly for celibacy; he views marriage as a concession for those who would otherwise burn with passion. Nevertheless Paul's understanding of marriage in Corinthians, and in Ephesians 5 strongly affirms the mutuality of marriage to the extent of undermining culturally normative roles. Likewise with slavery, Paul encourages Christians to serve their masters but gain their freedom if possible and masters to treat their slaves with respect and sincerity. The effect of the gospel is to undermine the cultural norms, but for the present time Paul recognises that Christians need to live as good witnesses to the society around them. Again with women wearing head coverings Paul appears to acknowledge (1 Cor 11:11) that, in Christ, women have freedom to cover or uncover their heads, but that it would be unnecessarily controversial for them to do so. All of this would seem to be an outworking of Paul's core belief that in Christ there is no longer “Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” coupled with his desire that while

everything might be permissible it is not beneficial. In view of this might it be possible to argue that whilst celibacy is best, and heterosexual marriage is the norm, homosexual marriage may be an appropriate way of life for some?

### **Is the church irredeemably homophobic?**

The charge is that we treat homosexuals like second-class citizens; denying them the chance for fulfilment. In addition the church is accused of treating homosexual sin as worse than heterosexual sin or other issues like greed. In response we may wish to consider that the Bible nowhere suggests that sexual gratification is a right. However, if we have been, or are homophobic then we need to repent of that. At a pastoral level it is worth noting that if our impulses are primarily heterosexual these questions are more abstract, if our impulses are primarily homosexual then they are intensely personal. The least that we can do, as Christian Ministers, is treat people with grace and love; even if we ultimately disagree over the issue.

Questions of sexual orientation and practice are also questions about identity. Some of the arguments put forward are based on the assumption that homosexuality is the key part of someone's identity. But while sexual orientation is part of a person's identity, so is gender, ethnicity, social background and much more besides. As Christians our primary identity comes from being in Christ so it is appropriate that we resist attempts to define people on the basis of sexual orientation.

The church is not simply a place where we come to be comforted and indulged, but transformed by the power of God on the cross. It is not just about where we come from but what we are becoming. Ultimately our theology of sexuality and of sexual relationships needs to grapple with both creation and redemption; what does it mean to be fully human?

### **Overall response:**

In general Christians have taken one of four positions:

1. **Rejecting / condemning.** Homosexuality is sinful, homosexual orientation is to be rejected; it undermines and erodes society and we need to take a stand against those openly homosexual.
2. **Rejecting / compassionate.** Homosexual acts are sinful but orientation is a flaw not a sin. We are all called to live Godly lives and this impacts each of us differently. For some it is a struggle with alcohol, for others honesty.
3. **Qualified acceptance.** In an ideal world there would only be faithful, heterosexual marriage. In the same way we acknowledge remarriage, or war – faithful homosexual relations may be OK or the least worst option.
4. **Full acceptance.** Sexual relationships should be evaluated on the basis of their unitive not procreational purpose. Homosexual "marriage" expresses love, mutuality etc which are all good Christian virtues. It is a matter of compassion, love and justice that we should accept both.

### **Questions to think through**

How should we treat two Christians who are cohabiting? Does it make any difference whether they are heterosexual or homosexual?

How should we treat a homosexual member of our congregation? Do we expect them to manage their relationships any differently to a single heterosexual person? If so, why?