

Homosexuality: The Bible and the Anglican Crisis

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Anglican formularies have always acknowledged the primacy of the scriptures in shaping doctrine and ethics. The examination of the candidates for priesthood in the 1662 BCP, for example, says “seeing that you cannot by any other means compass the doing of so weighty a work, pertaining to the salvation of man, but with doctrine and exhortation taken out of the holy Scriptures, and with a life agreeable to the same; consider how studious ye ought to be in reading and learning the Scriptures, and in framing the manners both of yourselves, and of them that specially pertain unto you, according to the rule of the same Scriptures.” (*BCP Canada* 1959, p. 650). Richard Hooker, so often appealed on the question of authority within Anglicanism, did not believe in a ‘three-legged stool’ as if scripture, tradition and reason were all of equal weight; rather, he believed in the primacy of the Bible with tradition and reason as helpful aids to understanding scripture.ⁱ The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral similarly conceives of the Bible as central to Anglicanism. In recent days the *Windsor Report* made clear that any innovation in doctrine and ethics (such as that introduced by TEC in the consecration of a divorced man in a homosexual relationship to be a Bishop in the Anglican Communion or the decision by a diocese in Canada to allow the blessing of same-sex unions) must be proved by scripture.

Of course the interpretation of the Bible on this subject, and even what texts are to be considered as evidence in this discussion is contested. Some are content to say that the Bible has nothing positive to say on this issue; therefore we must set the Bible aside (or at least the biblical texts which specifically treat homosexuality) and make our ethical decisions on entirely different grounds.ⁱⁱ

Our situation is made more complicated (at least for Christians in the North Atlantic world) by our post-Enlightenment situation. We have been trained by the tradition of historical-critical exegesis to ask first and foremost about the historical context of any biblical text. For modernists the historical context weighs more heavily than the narrative or canonical contextⁱⁱⁱ because “history” is considered to be in the realm of “fact”, and the Bible to be in the realm of human “opinion.” A “correct”, that is “critical” reading of the text must force the Bible to submit to the canon of historical reconstruction. From this perspective an important consideration will be whether the biblical writer(s) is imagining the same or even a similar situation when addressing same-sex relationships. Is it possible, for example for the author of Genesis or Leviticus, or for Paul, to conceive of ‘modern’ committed homosexual relationships?

I will attempt to discuss several kinds of biblical texts: the seven texts usually thought to be “about” homosexuality; some texts which, although rarely mentioned may also discuss homosexuality in negative terms; texts concerning sexuality and marriage; “queer” readings of texts which have not traditionally been seen to be about homosexuality; texts which have led some to see an analogous relationship between homosexuality and other issues of “emancipation”; and finally the command to love. All of these texts must be addressed by anyone on any side of the issue who still wishes their doctrine and ethics to be shaped by scripture.^{iv}

The Seven texts usually considered

Genesis 19: 1-11 (-29) & Judges 19

In any discussion of homosexuality and the Bible the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (and its twin story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19) must be taken into account. By any estimation these are horrible stories, what Phyllis Trible has called texts of ‘terror.’ Through much of the history of interpretation it has seemed “obvious” that these stories involve the sin of homosexual rape. Some have attempted to argue that the “know” (Gen 19:5) does not mean sexual knowledge. This seems untenable in the light of the offer of Lot’s daughters (19:8). Another possible understanding of the text is that the sin is not that the men of Sodom wanted to have sex with men, but that they wanted to have sin with angels (cf. Gen 6:1-4; Jude 7). The problem here, of course, is that the men of Sodom do not know that the visitors are angels (see 19:5 – they call them “men”; the story of Judges 19 makes no reference to angels at all of course).

Much more plausibly many have argued that these stories are primarily about violence and lack of hospitality rather than homosexuality per se? Certainly the reference to Sodom in Ezekiel 16:49 as “not caring for the poor and needy” would seem to indicate that the basic rules of hospitality in the ancient Near East had been violated.^v

Certainly the kind of homosexual activity pictured in these texts is nothing like the committed, consensual relationships envisioned in recent Anglican discussions. All would agree that no form of rape could ever be justified.

The question remains, however, whether the text condemns only the lack of justice and the violence. Certainly the ancient interpretation of the text is divided. Some texts see the primary sin of Sodom to have been injustice or a violation of hospitality (Jer 23:14, Ez 16:49, Wisdom 10:8, Ecclus 16:82, Jubilees 13:17, bTalmud: *Sanhedrin* 109a, *Ketuboth* 103a, *Baba Batra* 12b, *Abot* 5.10, *Erubin* 49c); other texts focus on sexuality or homosexuality as the problem (2 Peter 2:6-10, Jude 7, Jubilees 7:20-21, 16:5-6, 20:5-6, Enoch 10:4, 34:1-2, Test Naph. 3:4-5, 4:1, Test Asher 7:1, Test Benj 9:1, Test Levi 14:6, 3 Macc 2”3, Philo *De Abr* 26:134-36, Josephus *Ant* 1.200, *Against Apion* 2.199, Gen Rabbah 50:7). It should also be noted that Ez 16:49 is followed by v.50 which states that the people of Sodom did detestable things as well as ignoring the needs of the poor: Ezekiel links together the sins of injustice and sexual immorality.

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

Some argue that the situation envisioned in Leviticus is the homosexual temple prostitution of Israel’s neighbours. In other words, homosexuality was something that the Israelites associated with pagan idolatry and so it was forbidden so that Israel would less likely to turn from the worship of God to the worship of idols. An immediate problem is that the word ‘zakar’ (male) is used, not the ordinary word usually used to describe a homosexual prostitute (qadesh). William Country has famously argued that these texts are only about purity laws now abrogated in Christ and therefore on the same level eating lobsters.^{vi} Obviously Leviticus forbids the mixing different kinds of cloth together, the eating of particular kinds of foods, and a plethora of

other actions that the New Testament and most Christians consider to be abrogated in Christ. But does this argument not end up proving too much and implying that everything from adultery to bestiality should also be considered only a purity law, rather than a matter of ethics? Not all of the Levitical laws have been abrogated: see for example the centre of these chapters - Leviticus 19:18: “you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

It should be especially noted that, according to Leviticus 20:13 both parties in homosexual relationship are to be punished, implying that a consensual relationship is envisaged here.

1 Corinthians 6:9 (& 1 Timothy 1:10)

Translations do not serve us well here: for “malakoi” and “arsenotoitai” the NIV reads: “male prostitutes and homosexual offenders” (the ideas of ‘prostitution’ and ‘offender’ are both imported, not a necessary interpretation; the RSV: “sexual perverts” – conflates the two words and may be meant to imply that homosexuality is the issue here, but there are many sexual “perverts” who are heterosexual. But if Paul had meant sexual sin more generally could have more easily used the word ‘porneia’ as he does earlier in v.9 and in v. 13; the ESV: conflates the two words: “men who practice homosexuality.”

The major problem here is that these words are rare. “Malakoi” literally means the “soft ones” and probably refers in this context to the passive partner in a homosexual act. “Arsenokoitai” Paul may have been coined by Paul himself as it occurs almost exclusively in Christian literature after this first reference. It is a combination of two terms: “arsenos” (“male”) and “koitn” (“to bed with, to lie with, to have sex with”). Literally, therefore, the word means “one who has sex with men.” Paul may have coined this term using these two Greek words, because both terms occur in Leviticus 18 and 20 (which, as we have seen, is the part of the Torah which prohibits homosexual practice). The term itself, then would be an allusion to the “all-inclusive” condemnation of homosexual relations found in the laws of Leviticus. Used in conjunction with the reference to the passive sexual partner, Paul is using the term “arsenokoitai” to designate the more active partners in homosexual relationship.

The combination is significant: Paul is not talking about only exploitation or sex for money^{vii}: by combining the two terms “malakoi” and “arsenokoite” he appears to be saying that all forms of homosexual practice should be avoided. It is one way in which Paul, speaking as a Jew to a Hellenistic context felt he needed to spell out what “immorality” (“porneia”) meant.

1 Timothy 1:10 also uses the Greek term “arsenokoite.” The laws discussed in 1 Timothy 1:8-10 are not (as is sometimes argued) laws against the civil government, but rather the Torah. In fact, the verses are probably simply an interpretation and application of the Decalogue to the situation facing the church receiving this letter. “Killers of fathers and mothers” corresponds to the 5th commandment (“honour your father and mother”), “Murderers” to the 6th (“do not murder”), the sexually immoral and “arsenokoitai” to the 7th (“do not commit adultery”), “kidnappers/slave traders” to the 8th (“do not steal”), liars and perjurers to the 9th (“do not bear false witness”). That the vice list here corresponds to the order of the Decalogue speaks against making ‘kidnappers’ into a word which explains “arsenokoite” (Robin Scroggs’ argument). In that case,

the word “arsenokoite” would refer to pimps who kidnapped young boys and turned them into prostitutes. The context implies, rather, that the word “kidnapper” introduces a new concept and that “arsenokoitai” simply means “men who have sexual relations with other men,” thereby explaining a contemporary application of the Decalogue prohibition of adultery for the readers of 1 Timothy.

Romans 1:18-2:1

Romans 1:18-2:1 presents idolatry and immorality as two sides of the same coin. The crux of the text for our purposes is vv.20-25. The progression in the text is as follows:

1. lack of thanksgiving leads to ignorance and idolatry
2. which leads to lustful hearts
3. which leads to degradation of the body.

The issue is not simply pederasty, an abusive form of sexual domination between an older man and a younger boy. Although pederasty was a common form of homosexual practice in the Greco-Roman world, the reference to sex between women in 1:26 shows that it is homosexual practice itself which this passage precludes.

Paul does not say that God’s wrath is the punishment for homosexuality, but that homosexuality itself is one example of God’s wrath, i.e. God’s punishment, his ‘handing over,’ for lack of gratitude to God. Paul seems to focus on homosexual practice because it provides a graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God’s created order portrayed in Genesis 1:26-28. God the creator made man and woman for each other, to cleave together, to be fruitful and multiply. “When human being “exchange” these created roles for homosexual intercourse, they embody the spiritual condition of those who have ‘exchanged the truth about God for a lie.’”^{viii}

Romans 2:1 should not be ignored in any discussion of this text: Paul’s point in Romans 1-3 is not that some are guilty and therefore liable to judgement, but that all are guilty (Romans 3:23 is the climax and logical conclusion of Romans 1-3: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”; all are “without excuse.”) Homosexuality is simply one manifestation of sin among many others.

Texts not usually discussed

Jude 7-8 / 2 Peter 2:6-10

“Sexual immorality and went after other flesh” could be a tautology: the homosexual immorality of the people of Sodom was their desire for angelic “flesh.”

Genesis 9:20-27

Robert Gagnon has argued that the sin of Ham against his father Noah was a case of homosexual incestuous rape. It is probable that the ancient Israelite author found this sin to be so heinous because it combined so many sins, so many actions that even on their own would have been considered heinous.^{ix}

Jesus

Jesus did not speak directly on this issue – but does that lack of direct condemnation imply toleration of homosexual practice? Two reasons seem to speak against the view that Jesus would have accepted homosexual behaviour. First, on other sexual issues Jesus shows no signs of abrogating the Torah and Jewish tradition. In fact, when he does speak of sexual issues he makes things more strict (on adultery and lust: Mt 6:27-30; on divorce: Mt 19:1-12). When Jesus does encounter those who have sinned sexually, it is certainly true that he was loving, caring and accepting of those people. But in no case do we hear of Jesus approving of their sin (John 4; Luke 7:36-50; John 7:53-8:11^x). For Jesus, seeking the lost did not mean condoning a lifestyle which the Torah forbade but, rather, restoring that sinner to a state of wholeness and forgiveness.

It should be noted, however, that compared with, say, “money” it does appear that Jesus is *relatively* disinterested with the topic of sexual sin. Certainly this is partly because there was a strong consensus among Jews on sexual issues, a consensus that Jesus felt no need to challenge.

“Porneia”

If it is accepted that 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 are explications of the ideas of “porneia” (sexual immorality) or “adultery” (in the Decalogue), this would open the door to us considering whether the many other texts which refer to sexual immorality in the New Testament are implicit references to homosexuality, as well as other forms of sexual sin.

Marriage texts

Genesis 1:26-28, echoed by Jesus in Matthew 19:1-12, provides the biblical foundation for God’s purposes for marriage. Homosexual marriage finds no basis in the text. The burden of proof for arguing that homosexual relations should be allowed in the believing community seems to be on those who wish to make the change.

Texts used to argue for sex-same relationships

Several kinds of biblical texts have been used to argue in favour of same-sex unions or relationships.

“Queer” readings

Some have argued that homosexual relationships are actually found within the Bible in contexts in which they are not disapproved of. The stories of David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, the centurion and his slave (Lk 7:1-10) have all been used to argue that the Bible contains positive examples of same-sex relationships. The story of Ruth and Naomi seems highly questionable for numerous reasons (including Naomi’s work to put Ruth and Boaz together). The story of the centurion’s slave is lacking in data. The story of David and Jonathan does contain material which might possibly lead one to suspect that there might have been a sexual dimension to their relationship, but again there is not enough evidence to make a decision one way or another. The assertion that Paul or Jesus may have been homosexual is without any foundation at all.

Arguments from analogous emancipation texts

Perhaps the strongest argument from scripture that same-sex relationship should be accepted within the church are those arguments which state that there is a gospel trajectory which should move us to consider homosexual people to be in a similar category to other groups who are freed from restrictive prejudices by the inclusive work of Christ.

A popular text for making this argument is Acts 15 (and many related texts) in which a council assembled in Jerusalem debate whether gentiles as gentiles should be accepted as full members of Christ, that is without circumcision. A major hurdle to this interpretation is that the list of things included as still forbidden for gentiles includes “porneia” (Acts 15:29).

It is argued as well that Paul’s list of those to be considered one in Christ in Galatians 3:28 (“neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female”) should be expanded to include “gay and straight.” Certainly we could argue that Paul spent most of his ministry arguing the Jew/gentile question, spent some energy working through the slave/free question (see Philemon, for example), and only a small amount of time on the male/female issue. Should we not seek out those groups which are excluded and oppressed in various ways and proclaim the inclusive love of Christ for them? On the one hand, yes, absolutely! No thoughtful Christian (except perhaps some radical five point Calvinists) would want to argue that God does not love everyone. Christ died for the world, not just for a few. On the other hand, inclusion without transformation would obviously be consider cruel in numerous situations – would it be freedom in Christ to proclaim to the alcoholic that God loves them, but that there is no hope or help for change? We would want, indeed insist, that transformation is possible, in spite of the fact that some people seem to be genetically predisposition to alcoholism. If we are to expand Paul’s list in Galatians 3:28, we must think carefully about what emancipation might mean for homosexual persons. Does it mean acceptance of any form of sexual behaviour? Few would argue this. Does it mean an “openness to relational options” as has been argued by quite a number of advocates on the liberal side^{xi} including (it seems to me) any who insist that (active) bi-sexuals be included in our discussions? Does it mean that homosexuals should be told clearly that the church will bless their relationships but that such blessings must be monogamous? Or does it mean that what traditional Christians have always argued, that God’s love does not mean God’s acceptance of all behaviour and that homosexual persons must remain chaste or seek healing?

Love texts

This brings us to the crux of the question, I think. If the law is summarized in the double commandment to love God and love the neighbour, what does it mean to love the homosexual neighbour? Many have asserted that the liberal position is the loving position, that acceptance, inclusion without insistence on transformation of behaviour is the more generous position.

This, of course, begs the question of what love is and whether homosexual behaviour is actually healthy behaviour. The very uncomfortable question must be raised. What kind of homosexual acts do we envision are being blessed in a “same-sex blessing”? Are homosexual acts disapproved of in scripture because such acts are dangerous?

Conclusion

On homosexuality scripture appears to speak with one voice: every text which speaks of homosexuality condemns it, and there are no texts which explicitly uphold homosexual practice as godly, holy or even allowable, and no one in the scriptures, as far as we know, who was a homosexual who is held up as a godly example. The only positive mention of people who had participated in homosexual acts comes in 1 Corinthians 6 where Paul warns against various kinds of immorality, including homosexuality, and reminds the Corinthian Christians that “such **were** some of you.” In short, the Bible says that homosexual practice is sinful.

I have no doubt that people on both sides of this divisive issue are speaking and acting out of a desire to love their neighbour. I am also convinced that there are people on both sides of this issue who are filled with hate. It is my view that it would not be a loving towards homosexual persons to ordain practicing homosexuals as priests or to bless same-sex unions. Love requires not simply tolerance or acceptance of homosexual practice and homosexual persons, but love which seeks to support those who experience same-sex attraction within the context of a transforming and healing Christian community. When Jesus said that divorce was allowed by Moses because of the hardness of peoples’ hearts he was implying that he had a cure for hardness of heart. When Paul says ‘such were some of you’ he witnesses to the transforming reality of the love of God in Christ. I am not saying that every person who has experienced same-sex attraction can be instantly ‘healed.’ I do believe that some people have experienced such healing. It is certainly true that many people with homosexual desires who have wanted to change have found substantial transformation in this area. It is also true that some do not – and their path is a hard path of obedience in suffering, and perhaps of falling and repenting. One of my best friends has walked this walk for many years, longing for freedom from same-sex attraction, finding some degree of healing, regressing, coming to Jesus for forgiveness and to friends for a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on, and starting again. It has been a painful road and many times I was tempted to counsel him to simply give up the fight. To our mutual joy he has not.

ⁱ Note that Hooker does not mention ‘experience’ as a fourth source of authority as is stated in recent editions of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. The inclusion of the term experience in the books discussion of Hooker on his feast day must either have been the result of error or mischief.

ⁱⁱ This seems to be (roughly) the position of Dan Via in Via and Robert Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Grand Rapids: Fortress, 2003) and of the late Richard Norris, “Some Notes on the Current Debate Regarding Homosexuality and the Place of Homosexuals in the Church,” *ATR* 90/3 (2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example, Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1974).

^{iv} “A discipline of biblical “hermeneutics,” i.e., of interpretation, has no point unless we are resolved to be obedient. . . . obedience is a duty that needs the discipline of hermeneutic reflection if it is to be carried through. We cannot obey in a vacuum of understanding.” Oliver O’Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 69.

^v Even a conservative scholar like Richard Hays seems to think that the violation of hospitality is the issue here: *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 381.

^{vi} William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

^{vii} As argued, for example, by Robin Scroggs (*The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]).

^{viii} Hays, 388.

^{ix} *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 63-71.

^x Of course the textual tradition of John 8 is disputed, but the text is regularly employed by advocates on both sides of this issue.

^{xi} See the work of Marvin Ellis, for example, who advocates polyamory: (*Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996]; *Same-Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis* [Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004]).