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towards a biblical mind

Homosexuality: Finding the Way of Truth and Love

by *Christopher Townsend*

"Biblical judgements against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate."

(Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Fortress Press, 1983, p. 127.)

Summary

Christians today hold divergent views on homosexuality. This paper reviews the key biblical material on homosexual practice and considers scientific and theological explanations of the origin of same-sex attraction. Finally, an indication is given of the multi-faceted response of the gospel to the needs of those with same-sex attraction and the importance of Christian churches being communities of acceptance and friendship.

The Church and Homosexuality

During the last twelve months scientific journals have discussed research results suggesting that homosexuality could have, in some cases, a genetic origin. Parliament has voted to lower the age of consent to 18 years for male homosexual intercourse. A major survey financed by the Wellcome Trust has challenged previous empirical findings on homosexual behaviour. Homosexuality is an issue rarely far from our attention.

In the churches homosexuality is debated with increasing intensity and growing divisions of opinion. Until the postwar period in the long history of the church there were few, if any, dissenting voices to the view that Scripture and nature teach us that homosexual behaviour is, without exception, immoral. The last few decades have seen a reappraisal by academic theologians, heated discussions in denominational bodies, and the emergence of organisations such as the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement promoting an active homosexual lifestyle as consistent with Christian teaching. Four approaches now represent the wide spectrum of views and attitudes within Christian circles to homosexual behaviour and orientation: 'rejecting-punitive', 'rejecting-compassionate', 'qualified acceptance', and 'full acceptance'.

A 'rejecting-punitive' stance rejects homosexual behaviour and orientation as incompatible with Christianity and, often buttressed by cultural stereotypes, is hostile towards people who are homosexual.

A 'rejecting-compassionate' approach regards homosexual behaviour as contrary to God's creative intent and never permissible for Christians. However, actions and orientation are distinguished and the church is to welcome into the community of forgiven sinners all who will follow Christ – irrespective of sexual orientation.

The position 'qualified acceptance' amounts to saying: the homosexual person is rarely, if ever, responsible for his sexual orientation; the prospects of developing a heterosexual orientation are minimal; celibacy is not always possible; stable homosexual unions may offer the prospect of human fulfilment and are obviously better than homosexual promiscuity. Homosexuality is never ideal because God's intention in creation is heterosexuality, attempts to develop heterosexual desires can be made, but occasionally and reluctantly, one may accept a homosexual partnership as the only way for some people to achieve a measure of humanity in their lives.

'Full acceptance' stresses the 'unitive purpose' of sexuality as central in God's sight and regards the 'procreative purpose' as, by comparison, incidental. Same-sex relationships can fully express the central purpose for sexuality so same-sex attraction may be affirmed. All sexual acts should be evaluated by their relational qualities: what matters is whether or not a particular relationship or action will enhance human fulfilment, faithfulness between persons, genuine intimacy and mutuality. The gender of the persons concerned is immaterial.

The view reached by Christians on the morality of homosexual behaviour impinges directly on church life, pastoral care and evangelism. The overall contours of theological belief not only shape, but may also be shaped by, the conclusions reached. Much

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is at stake when we discuss this subject. However, we must speak with care. Much unnecessary pain has been caused by divisive and insensitive remarks. We must consider the moral, intellectual and pastoral issues in the light of all that unites us. Whatever our experience of sexual attraction, we share a common situation as human beings, sexual beings, and sinful beings.

Homosexual Behaviour: Some Key Biblical Texts

There are, in fact, relatively few texts that address directly the issue of homosexual behaviour. The main passages are:

Genesis 19:1-29: Our word 'sodomy' owes its origin to this incident - perhaps inappropriately. The men of Sodom demand that Lot bring out his guests (two angels who look like men) so that they may 'know them' (v.5)(AV). In 1955 D. Sherwin Bailey in *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* argued that 'know' has no sexual connotation here. His views have been influential - despite the fact that students of the text have on the whole dismissed Bailey's arguments. The word 'know' is, statistically speaking, most often used in a non-sexual sense. However, in several places it refers to sexual relations. The context here all but demands that we understand such an intention - Lot certainly did (vv.6-8). Nonetheless, disapproval of all homosexual acts cannot be inferred from this passage. The men of Sodom intend homosexual rape. Sexual violence is a key characteristic of Sodom's sexual sin. When 2 Peter 2:7-8 speak of the 'lawless deeds' of the people of Sodom, the sins condemned are not identified precisely and may or may not include all homosexual behaviour. Jude 7 says that the people of Sodom 'gave themselves up to ... perversion' (more literally, 'went after other/strange flesh'). However, Jude may well be referring to Sodom's lusting after the bodies of angels, trying to transgress the boundary between the earthly and heavenly realms.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13: These verses prohibit sexual intercourse between two men and describe such behaviour as 'detestable'. These prohibitions appear without exception but their scope and intent have been debated. Some maintain that here, as in some other Old Testament passages, the word 'detestable' has cultic connotations. On this view, Leviticus condemns homosexual acts in the setting of idolatrous worship, practices mimicking the pagan worship of the Egyptians and Canaanites. However, both Leviticus 18 and 20 deal with sexual taboos: intercourse with blood relations (e.g. 20:17) and adultery (e.g. 20:10) are also condemned. This context, and the fact that nowhere else in Leviticus does 'detestable' have cultic overtones, indicate that a general moral proscription is intended.

1 and 2 Samuel: The friendship of David and Jonathan is recorded in language that strikes the modern Western ear as intensely emotional. After David's triumph over Goliath 'Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself' (1 Samuel 18:1) and the two men bound themselves together in a formal bond of friendship. On hearing of Jonathan's death David laments: 'I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women' (2 Samuel 1:26). Some have concluded that David and Jonathan had a homosexual relationship. Did not their relationship bring 'shame' upon Jonathan's mother (1 Samuel 20:30)? David led an active heterosexual life but it is possible he was bisexual. However, this view relies upon extra-biblical parallels, textual emendations and reading between the lines. There is no hint of erotic behaviour in the biblical text. Jonathan's shame, for example, is not linked to his sexuality but his lack of loyalty to his father and his family line in the dispute between Saul and David. David and Jonathan should be seen as a model of devoted male friendship, intimate and affectionate but not erotic.

Romans 1:18-32: These verses speak of homosexual acts as contrary to 'nature' (vv. 26-27) and one consequence now of God's judgement on human idolatry and rejection of God. The passage does not set out to provide ethical instruction for Christians but has implications for Christian sexual ethics many of which hinge on the meaning of 'nature' (*phusis*). Jonathan Boswell in *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* claimed that this 'passage

strongly implies that he [i.e. Paul] was not discussing persons who were by inclination gay' and the 'persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.' That is, he disapproves when people act against their own individual 'nature'. But the idea that some individuals have an inherent homosexual disposition and are constitutionally 'gay' is a modern one which took root only in the nineteenth century. Boswell is not leading us to the text's original meaning but imposing anachronistic ideas on it, allowing the concepts of psychology to take precedence over those of theology.

The word *phusis* does not bear a uniform meaning in either the New Testament or extra-biblical literature. At times it means custom, convention or human moral reflection. On this view, Romans 1 would be saying that rebellion against God results in rejection of human moral standards. The implication would be that Christian attitudes today to homosexuality should depend not on views held in Paul's day but on twentieth century human moral standards. However, a satisfactory interpretation of Romans 1 must recognise that Paul drew on the attitudes and language of Hellenistic Judaism. Hellenistic Jewish thinkers not only viewed homosexual behaviour with abhorrence but tended to link the philosophical category of 'nature' with God's law and creative purpose. This leads us on to the decisive factor in Paul's use of *phusis*, namely his biblical doctrine of creation. In C. E. B. Cranfield's words, by 'natural' and 'unnatural', 'Paul clearly means "in accordance with the intention of the Creator" and "contrary to the intention of the Creator" respectively' (*The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary, Vol. 1 p.125). The Creator's intention, unlike human conventions and scientific understanding, does not alter with changes in era or culture.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11/1 Timothy 1:9-10: Here we read that *arsenokoitai* are among the wicked who will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) and are lawbreakers and rebels, ungodly and sinful (1 Timothy 1:9-10). The meaning of *arsenokoitai* is debated. Some argue that its meaning is restricted, for example, to male prostitutes or pederasts. The linguistic evidence for these views is not strong. The word *arsenokoitai* is a compound of the words for 'male' and 'bed'; it reflects closely the language in the Greek Septuagint version of Leviticus 18:22; accordingly, it appears to refer to anyone who has homosexual intercourse. Had Paul, for example, wished to condemn only pederasty he could have used one of a number of Greek words with this more restricted meaning. The words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, both found in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, may be intended as complementary terms denoting the whole range of homosexual behaviour, *malakoi* having connotations of passivity and receptivity to homosexual advance and *arsenokoitai* more active connotations.

Conclusion: This review of key passages reveals a consistent antipathy towards homosexual behaviour in both Old and New Testaments. It is striking that the immediate theological context for the New Testament texts involves God's creation (Romans 1:26-27), God's law (1 Timothy 1:9-10) and God's kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Love is often championed as the one principle by which sexual conduct should be guided. But biblical ethics has more than one ingredient. The love felt by a man for another man, a woman for another woman, can be as passionate, sensitive and committed as that known by a heterosexual couple. But love, however tender, however faithful, cannot be its own guide. Love, seeking the highest welfare of others, must be informed and shaped by God's purposes for his creation and his kingdom. Nonetheless, some of the key texts are not as straightforward as one might imagine. They must be read in the light of the fundamental principles of a biblical perspective on sexuality. Doing this reinforces the conclusion that biblical judgements, far from relating solely to homosexual practices found in the ancient world, remain indispensable to today's debate.

Human Sexuality: Biblical Foundations

Sexuality, sexual differentiation, sexual intercourse and human procreation are woven into the divine plan for humanity (Genesis 1:26-29). However, the relationship between the first man and woman is given by God for another reason: 'It is not good for the

man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). Marriage, given for companionship, involves leaving, cleaving and becoming 'one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). 'One flesh' refers to the personal union of a man and woman, at all levels of their lives, expressed and deepened through their sexual relationship. The permanent, exclusive relationship of husband and wife is given as the one proper context for sexual intimacy.

In *Church Dogmatics* Barth argued that the image of God in humankind is found in the fellowship of man and woman. To be human is to be 'male or female, male and female'. Scripture nowhere defines the image of God and Barth probably places too much emphasis on gender and sexuality as integral to the *imago Dei*. Nonetheless there are important analogies between the differentiation-in-unity of the Trinity and the differentiation of humankind into male and female who find their unity in coming together as one flesh. The marriage of a man and a woman, a bond of fellowship open to procreation, reflects, even symbolises, the triune, creator God. To contend that the unitive function of sexual intimacy can be fulfilled in a homosexual relationship is to isolate one aspect of a complex symbol - putting asunder what God has joined together.

The life of Christ shows us that neither a committed, exclusive partnership nor sexual experience is essential to personal fulfilment. Jesus, who lived the only perfect human life, was single and celibate. The need not to be 'alone' may be met through friendships without sexual intimacy. Indeed while human sexuality is affirmed by the Bible, its significance is also qualified. Our true humanity does not ultimately rest in our sexuality but in fulfilling our capacity for personal communion with God.

Understanding the Origin of Homosexuality

In the 1940s Doctor A.C. Kinsey conducted a famous investigation into human sexuality and identified everyone as falling somewhere on continuum from 0 (an exclusively homosexual bias) to 6 (an exclusively heterosexual bias). Between these poles, people are found with dual, indeterminate or fluctuating sexual orientation. He concluded that 4 per cent of (white American) men are exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, and 10 per cent for up to three years. His research methods have, however, been criticised. The table below presents some findings from the recent survey funded by the Wellcome Trust.

	Men (%)	Women (%)
Any homosexual contact	6.1	3.4
Includes:		
Any genital contact	3.6	1.7
At least one homosexual partner in last 5 years	1.4	0.6

Source: A. Johnson *et al.*, *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles*, Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1994, ch.7.

Over 90 per cent of men and over 95 per cent of women who had had a partner of the same sex had also had a partner of the opposite sex. Exclusively homosexual behaviour is rare.

Suggested explanations of the origin of homosexual orientation fall into two broad categories: biological and environmental. 'Biological' theories point to genetic and hormonal factors. Some recent studies appear to support such theories. However, the reliability of the studies and the explanatory power of such theories are still under investigation, and disputed, within the scientific community.

'Environmental' theories point to psychological and social factors. Many psychoanalytic theories identify disturbances in parent-child relationships as crucial: a perceived rejection by a child's same-sex parent may, depending on the child's reaction, result in emotional needs. The sense of rejection by and loss of the parent may occur, for example, because of divorce, prolonged absence, illness, ill-treatment and the child becomes a 'psychological orphan'. The seeds of longing for closeness with another man (or, as the case may be, woman) may be sown and alleviation of those emotional needs may be sought in sexual encounters. Doctor Elizabeth Moberly, a research psychologist, argued along these lines in *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic*. Learning theories claim that

homosexual experiences in infancy or adolescence may increase the likelihood of subsequent selection of homosexual interactions.

Notwithstanding recent developments, scientific knowledge regarding homosexuality is incomplete and we may sum up by saying:

There is a general if informal consensus today that no one theory of homosexuality can explain such a diverse phenomenon. There is no completely determinative cause... there appears to be a variety of facilitating influences... while homosexuality can develop without genetic or hormonal factors being operative, it generally does not develop without the influence of learning and socialisation. (S. L. Jones and D. E. Workman, 'Homosexuality: The Behavioural Sciences and the Church', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 1989, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 221).

A theological account of the origin of same-sex attraction complements and undergirds a scientific account. It does not explain the presence of such attraction in particular individuals but helps to explain, at a spiritual level, why there are some people of same-sex orientation. The rejection of God by the human race has led to 'every kind of wickedness' (Romans 1:29) but in Romans 1 there is, in particular, a link between idolatry and homosexuality. Rejection of the Creator *by all* humanity results in, and is made manifest by, rejection of the creation pattern for sexual relations *by some*. Henri Blocher observes that creatures who worship the Creator are in relationship with a being who in a profound sense is 'Other' and suggests that rejection of the 'Other' is aptly mirrored in the sexual realm by rejection of those who are 'other' in gender.

Sin's impact is multi-faceted and its relation to same-sex attraction is complex. Sin is sometimes understood in terms of choice alone: a deliberate decision to disobey God. When this is done (subject to any element of choice that may be present in some people in the formative processes which determine sexual orientation) links between sin and same-sex attraction are difficult to sustain. However, since the fall, sin has been the root cause of a deep state of disorder within human nature. What is found innate in men and women is not necessarily good. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it 'there is no health in us': homosexual orientation may be 'natural' to us and yet inconsistent with God's purposes in Creation. Further, sin is a power which dominates people and deceives us that we are free. We are all 'slaves to sin' (John 8:34), filled with compelling desires leading us into disobedient actions, living out involuntary but culpable rebellion (see, e.g., Romans 7: 13-25). Those compelling desires are different for different people; in some cases, homosexual desires may fall into this category. Moreover, 'environmental' theories accord with the fact that people are affected by the sins of others (rejection by parents does occur) and some inward effects of sin (making one's own needs paramount, distorting perceptions, possibly leading to imagined rejection).

The Gospel: Building a Church for Everyone

The meeting of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53 - 8: 11) has much to teach Christians. First, Jesus reminds the Pharisees of their sin and does not tolerate hypocrisy (v.7, cf. Matthew 23). None of us is without sexual sin and we must not throw stones. Paul, after speaking of unnatural relations, went on to say that the one who condemns others has 'no excuse' himself (Romans 2: 1). Richard Lovelace has written 'Most of the repenting that needs to be done on this issue of homosexuality needs to be done by straight people, including straight Christians. By far the greater sin in our church is the sin of neglect, fear, hatred, just wanting to brush these people under the rug.' Secondly, Jesus does not condemn the woman but neither does he condone her sin (vv.10-11, cf. Luke 7:36-50). The challenge is for the church to find ways in which to express a similar balance. Thirdly, Jesus acts as the woman's friend before he confronts her sin. She is friendless, an outcast in a hostile society, in danger even of her life and Jesus is the one person on her side.

The gospel is God's answer to the problems caused by human sin. Full forgiveness for the past, the love of a new heavenly Father,

membership of a new family, new resources for living as God intends and a new future are available. Sin is present in a homosexual lifestyle and in some form ultimately lies behind same-sex attraction. The gospel offers 'gay liberation' by breaking the power of sin. We now consider three aspects of the outworking of the gospel.

(1) *Identity*: In *The Church and the Homosexual*, J.J. McNeill writes:

No person with heterosexual tendencies would be inclined

to answer the question, Who are you? with the response: I am a heterosexual. But if they felt free to do so, this would be the response of homosexuals...people with a homosexual orientation tend to accept their homosexuality as their deepest self-identity image, the most important single fact about themselves. (p.157)

Everyone who hears Christ's call to follow him is confronted with the need for radical repentance: to deny himself and take up his cross. For many who turn to Christ the depth of repentance to which we are called may dawn slowly over the years; for the homosexual his whole identity, as he sees it, is on the line from the outset. Our evangelism must be sensitive to this. We must preach grace: Christ receives us as we are; but not cheap grace: none of us may remain as we are. We must patiently teach that our true identity is ultimately to be found not in our sexuality but in taking up a new identity in Christ. Jesus 'calls his own sheep by name' (John 10:3), knowing us intimately and addressing us personally. Yet he purposes to give each believer 'a new name...known only to him who receives it' (Revelation 2:17), a new, unique and eternal identity.

(2) *Holiness*: For all unmarried Christians, a holy life involves celibacy. We should not underestimate the struggles some-times involved. One man with same-sex attraction, having begun to abstain, told a Christian counsellor:

Since then I've felt more lonely and depressed than ever. It doesn't seem fair that I've given up something that's wrong but still feel all these conflicts. It just makes me want to go back. I don't really want to do it with a man again, I just want the pain to stop. (J. Dallas, *Desires in Conflict*, Harvest House, p.120)

The Christian battling with homosexuality may well find, as God works within, homosexual attractions to become less frequent, less intense, less of a preoccupation. Nonetheless, he or she may feel that their situation is frustrating and unfair. The heterosexual person, unlike them, may have chosen singleness or believe marriage is likely in the future. Coming to see singleness as God's gift bringing advantages unavailable to the married person (1 Corinthians 7) is part of the answer. So is an awareness that this life

will give way to a new creation in which sinful desires are no more, marriage is no more, and whatever form - if any - sexuality takes, it will be radically transformed. Nonetheless, academic and anecdotal evidence reveals that among those who - on an entirely voluntary basis - want to see their experience of sexual attraction develop in a way that aligns better with their chosen lifestyle as Christians, at least some do find that counselling helps them on that journey.

(3) *Community*: Many people of homosexual orientation experience a sense of alienation from the church. Yet the church is called to be a 'new community' where people may know and be known, love and be loved. We need to review the life of our churches at congregational level, small group level and one-to-one level to see if they match this ideal. Do people with same-sex attraction know that the church is fully committed to welcoming, accepting and supporting them? Patterns of church life are often designed with married couples and their children upper-most in mind. Our churches need to be communities of friendship in which the single person may find deep fellowship. Friendship can be the answer to 'aloneness', a therapeutic experience, a source of support and human enrichment. Barnabas, befriending Paul when he first turned to Christ and was viewed with suspicion, is an example to us. David and Jonathan in their intimate and loyal friendship are another.

Concluding Remarks: Love and Truth

The Christian community must respond to the issue of homosexuality and to people who experience same-sex attraction in a way that combines love and truth, compassion and biblical integrity. There are people outside our churches or struggling within them because as Christians we have not yet learned to love as we should. Meanwhile, the debate among Christians about homosexuality is, implicitly, a debate about how to do theology. Homosexual behaviour can only be affirmed by Christians if the following are accepted: the repudiation of a created moral order, a shift from an objective to a subjective morality, and a new centre of gravity in theology whereby human insights and 'pastoral concern' can take precedence over divine revelation. But love and truth are not in the end isolated from, or opposed to, one another. The church will only be able to love people who experience same-sex attraction to the full if we have, along with more tender hearts, a firm grasp on the searching insights and transforming power of Christian truth.