

LGBTIQ+ Sexuality and the Bible – MHCC 2 July 2017

Why are we talking about this?

For some of us: the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people is so obvious and necessary, that it is not even a thing to discuss

For some of us: homosexuality is so obviously biblically condemned, that it is pandering to social trends to dig through it

For some of us: what the religious records of foreign faith communities thousands of years ago have to say about what *they* thought of homosexuality is completely irrelevant to 21st century life

For some of us: the point of our scriptures is to lead us to Jesus, not to advise on morality or sexuality

For some of us: this is not theoretical, it is our own lives, and to talk about homosexuality as an *issue* is to abstract our unique individual stories, and make the heartaches and joys of our lives material for theory, which is unloving.

So why are we talking about this?

- Because within our own community we hold all those positions, and we need to find ways to listen to each other
- Because within our community are those who consider the bible an authoritative source for guiding Christian ethics, in light of which it matters what the bible says about homosexuality
- Because many of us have come to a desire to welcome and affirm LGBTIQ+ people independent of biblical tradition, but we value the bible and want to know how our heart-position can align with the writings of our tradition
- Because if we as a church affirm LGBTIQ+ people, we need to find ways to remain in conversation with the members of the Body of Christ all over the world, and particularly our own friends and families, who do not take that position

I grew up with a traditional understanding of LGBTIQ+ sexuality: that it was wrong, and that people should be celibate if they couldn't be heterosexual. I believed this. I taught it to others. I mentored teenagers at youth camps while holding firmly to this understanding.

Now feel ashamed. I wonder how much damage I did to vulnerable people. I recently signed a Christian apology to the LGBTIQ+ community because I am deeply, deeply sorry that I participated in hate- and hurt-filled church cultures around homosexuality.

In my early twenties I discovered Christians who were gay and lesbian, and Christians who thought that was great. It busted my head. I went along to an evening where LGBTIQ+ Christians shared their stories. I listened to a man describe his tormented life trying not to be gay, and being persecuted for his sexuality. He told us that he would never choose that life, ever. I listened to a woman who had been born in a male body describe the agony of living in a culture that had no place for her, and the welcome she found in Christ.

I had to go back to the bible I thought I knew and see how these people, who I could see where absolutely genuine, fit into my scriptures. Over several years, I was converted to a position of LGBTIQ welcome.

I am NOT here to try and change your mind. I am inviting us to listen to some possibilities, and understand how people might genuinely interpret texts differently and all be seeking to serve the same God.

For those who this is your personal story, I ask for your grace to allow me to discuss in the abstract what is your reality.

I am going to use 'homosexuality' as a catch-all to cover LGBTIQ+ (because it is simpler language) but it is not simple.

Consider three axes that contribute to our sexuality:

Sex (biology)

Gender (identity – inner sense of self, plus cultural construction of self)

Sexual orientation (attraction)

I am Female Woman Heterosexual – socially convenient, but not universal alignment of the three.

I am a biologically a woman (sex), my inner sense of self and the way I am held by society is as a woman (gender) and I am sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex (heterosexual) – which is socially convenient, but not a universal alignment of the three. Biologically, if I had a mastectomy and hysterectomy, I may become less biologically female (sex) – but my inner sense of self remains as a woman (gender).

All three axes are not polarities but graduating scales. Intersect where you are on the three and you have a nearly endless diversity of possibility – which is why we speak of LGBTIQ **PLUS**.

All of us bring to biblical interpretation a belief (often implicit) in what homosexuality is, falling roughly into the following categories:

Homosexuality as a free choice: most who hold this view see homosexuality as conscious rebellion, on par with sexual abuse, leading to paradigms calling for a response of repentance and behaviour change (to be welcomed into the grace of God) or condemnation, for those who do not 'repent'.

Note that this general position also includes those (mostly feminists) who want to reclaim control over their own bodies. Elizabeth Stuart: 'once again we have to reclaim our bodies from tolerant liberals who accept us 'because we can't help it' and claim the freedom to choose to whom we relate sexually'.

Homosexuality as an illness: a deep flaw, a brokenness, from which one might hope to be cured. Like alcoholism, it is a profound drive, the solution to which is abstinence, possibly with counselling to assist behaviour change. *Some go so far as to see it as demon possession, with the solution being exorcism.* Most consider celibacy an appropriate response.

Homosexuality as a tragedy of nature: For some this is a tragic flaw arising from human original sin, and as such is inherent in some individuals (like greed) – and should not be therefore encouraged; for others it is akin to infertility, or disability: the correct response is compassion, and accommodation to allow people to live the fullest life possible within their limits. *Some advocating gay marriage fit here: for those who by tragedy of birth cannot marry in the fullest sense, at least they can be granted access to a life-long partnership LIKE marriage.*

Homosexuality as a created variety of nature: like being an introvert or an extrovert, or tall or short, or left- or right-handed. Something that enriches all of us by widening our experience of life, and bringing different perspectives. The response to this, then, is celebration.

Our bible does not distinguish between these, but almost certainly comes out of the first assumption: homosexuality as a choice. Homosexuality as an innate orientation only arises as an understanding in the mid-nineteenth century. (Although homosexual practice is known in most cultures through time, and many also have had words for people habitually engaged in homosexual practice in preference to heterosexual, basic orientation appears to have been understood as universally heterosexual)

Modern science errs on the side of homosexuality as innate, but cannot tell us if it is a flaw, a tragedy or a gift. Which assumption WE adopt will shape how we read the bible, and how we respond to each other.

Where do you sit? How do you listen to those who sit somewhere else?

So what DOES the bible say?

Six key texts **explicitly mention** homosexual practice (inc two pairs, so really four instances)

- **Genesis 19:** the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

- **Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13** *If a man lies with a man in the same way as with a woman, it is an abomination; they will be put to death*

- **1 Cor 6:9-10**

- **1 Tim 1:10** *both texts include a list of vices include the Greek words malakos & arsenokoitai, often translated 'homosexuals'*

- **Romans 1:26-27:** *That is why God abandoned them to degrading passions: why their women have exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural practices, and the men, in a similar fashion, too, giving up normal relations with women, are consumed with passion for each other, men doing shameful things with men and receiving in themselves due reward for their perversion.*

Also: several references through the bible to Sodom as a byword for 'evil';

possible condemnation of male prostitutes in OT writings (if mentioned, they are condemned, but not clear that is what is intended in the references

AND: *affirming NT discussion of eunuchs, including comments by Jesus, who mentions some are born eunuchs and some become so later (Mt 19:12); Eunuchs are by nature celibate, but OT sees them as outcast, so this is a shift to include as acceptable someone outside the 'normal' sexual range*

- *Jesus heals the Centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10) who is 'highly valued by him' – possible allusion to sexual relationship (unlikely)*
- *David & Jonathon – 1 Sam 18 – 2 Sam 1 & 9: a great love between men, dearer to each other than their own soul, a love more wonderful than the love of a woman, out of which they made a covenant of commitment to each other, which Jonathon's father (Saul) considers shameful*

AND: *Genesis creation stories, which don't mention homosexuality and that is taken by some to exclude it from God's good creation*

The four key references in more detail

Genesis 19

Traditional reading is that the sin of Sodom is that the men were homosexuals, as evidenced by their desire to have sex with the male visitors at Lot's house. Destruction of the city indicates God's complete rejection of homosexuality.

Alternate readings:

Note Sodom was condemned in ch.18 before the incident described at Lot's house. Other biblical references describe the sin of Sodom as:

Isaiah 1:10-17: failure to match their religious practice with actions for justice

Jeremiah 23:14: adultery, lies & wickedness

Ezekiel 16:49ff pride, excess, failure to help the poor and needy

Zephaniah 2:9f pride, scoffing at God, boasting

Jude v.7 'unnatural lusts' in sexual practice – will return to this

The story of Genesis 19 then is an illustration of one incident out of a culture of widespread wickedness. And what it illustrates is an attempted sexual attack on guests, violating the basic hospitality codes of the culture. The offence is (attempted) rape – which is not about sex, of any orientation, but about power, and an attempt to shame/ humiliate the visitors. *This is why Lot offers his daughters to the mob instead – in his culture, there was less shame for the man in sexual violation of 'his' women than in the sexual penetration of a man – the latter seen as removing a man's masculinity, therefore destroying the person-hood of the visitors and rendering them non-people; deeply patriarchal culture sees rape of the woman as an offence against the man, not against the woman. The (horrific!!) parallel story in Judges 19 shows this: the gang rape and murder of a Levite's concubine at Gibeah - where the gang rape goes ahead, and the woman dies: the man brings all Israel to witness and revenge the offence done TO HIM, not to the woman herself. Clearly the initial call of the men to have sex with the male visitor is not seen as relating to homosexuality here.*

Jesus refers to Sodom and Gomorrah in Mt 10:15, Lk 10:12 when sending out his disciples and describing those who may not welcome them, which parallels 'failure of hospitality' as the main offence.

Second reading:

The problem was an attempt to have sex with angels. *Linked to stories from Genesis 6:1-3 about how humans had sex with angels and created a mixed-race of giants (1 Enoch – ancient Jewish writing outside the bible – clarifies this as an evil act).* A problem then of mixing two species – miscegenation. The reference in Jude

seems to allude to this 'sex with angels' idea. It is a curious piece of mythology, then, but entirely irrelevant to questions of homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13 *If a man lies with a man in the same way as with a woman, it is an abomination; they will be put to death*

Traditional reading: This prohibition describes God's intention for humans for all time. The severity of the punishment indicates the seriousness with which God takes this offence. While other aspects of Leviticus were superseded by NT writings/ practice, moral laws were not, and this therefore applies along with prohibitions against incest and bestiality.

Alternate readings: this forms part of the Holiness Code, which was crucial to establishing Israelite identity as they entered a foreign land. Anything that appeared to be an infiltration of Canaanite culture into Israelite practice was outlawed, to retain strong Israelite identity. These boundaries were broken down by the work of Christ; Paul's missionary work, and the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) that integrated Paul's insights into Christian doctrine, affirmed that upholding boundaries that mark Jews off from Gentiles was no longer necessary. Food laws and circumcision were far more important to the communities in that deliberation, but the Holiness Code as a whole was understood to be included.

AND/OR: Holiness Code is deeply concerned with ritual purity. Hence prohibitions on what men can do when they have wet dreams, or what women can do during their periods. Cultic/ ritual sins were at issue, which were often concerned with mixing of two things that shouldn't be mixed (eg types of cloth, types of food, human-animal sex, anal sex). The use of the word 'abomination', which is a very strong word in our culture, is linked in the OT to cultic/ ritual impurity.

There is no mention of women in the prohibition, because the issue is not same-sex orientation but men being the 'passive' partner in sex (*Later cultures have the same prohibitions on heterosexual sex where a woman is on top of a man, because he is seen as not appropriately 'active'*). The prohibition is linked to patriarchal understandings of what it is to be a man (and a woman). One cannot be a ritually clean and appropriate man while acting 'as a woman' in sex. BODY is used throughout the Holiness Code as a metaphor for understanding the identity of Israel in relation to God. Penetration of one not meant to be penetrated threatens the integrity/ wholeness of the body by challenging whether it is 'male', and therefore threatens (symbolically) the wholeness of Israel (*construed as male; metaphorically 'God's Son'*).

AND/OR: it could be as simple as concern in community entering a new land, seeking to populate and overcome it, not to 'waste' any seed.

We are no longer bound by the religious rituals and cultic norms of Israelite communities over 3,000 years ago.

It is not enough to say 'it's the OT so we don't need to take it seriously'. We need to consider what is the same, and what is different, in our context. Our holiness is now determined by our connection with Christ, not our maintenance of cultic or cultural boundary markers.

1 Cor 6:9-10

1 Tim 1:10 *malakos & arsenokoitai*

Traditional reading: These words clearly mean homosexuals, or at least those practising homosexual sex, which indicates that the NT writers consider the OT prohibitions on homosexual sex to continue to be relevant.

Alternate readings: The meaning of these words is not clear. *Malakos* literally means 'soft' and was a derogatory term for anyone considered 'effeminate'. It was also used for 'morally weak, cowardly, lazy'; it appears to be slang for male prostitutes – *those who sold themselves for men to have sex with*.

Arsenokoitai is a word Pauls seems to have made up. It combines two words (man and bed) found in the Greek translation of the Leviticus text (*it is wrong for a man to bed with another man*) to make an active noun (*man-bedders*). Paired with *Malakos*, it could mean the active sexual partner to a *malakos* (passive recipient). Others have suggested it could refer to anal rape; or possibly to homosexual slave traders; or 'wanton, lewd or irresponsible male-on-male sex'. Most likely is that it refers to *pederasty*: a common practice of the period, where older, more powerful Greek men had sex with youths, even boys, or slaves.

Both *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* are listed with economic vices, implying the issue is exploitation rather than homosexual sex per se.

Romans 1:26-27: *That is why God abandoned them to degrading passions: why their women have exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural practices, and the men, in a similar fashion, too, giving up normal relations with women, are consumed with passion for each other, men doing shameful things with men and receiving in themselves due reward for their perversion.*

This is the key 'proof text' for condemnation of homosexual practice. It is the only biblical mention of sex between women.

Traditional reading: Homosexual sex is contrary to the created intention of God and therefore wrong. It arises out of an idolatrous shift away from the truth of God to a self-serving ethic.

Alternate readings:

Possible this refers to pederasty as discussed above, but given the inclusion of women this is less likely.

The word 'natural' (*phusikain*) could be read as 'customary' or 'usual'. This is how it is used in 1 Corinthians, when Paul uses the same word to say it is not *natural* for a man to have long hair, although biologically it is clearly exactly what will happen unless one intervenes to cut a man's hair. Hence Paul may in Romans, as in Corinthians, be using the word to refer to social custom not biological law.

Probably Paul had no concept of homosexual orientation, and assumes everyone is heterosexual. Therefore he is addressing people who he believes are choosing to act against their 'nature', when in fact they are acting *with* their nature. *By this logic, their actions should be affirmed, and the condemnation would be for homosexuals who enter a heterosexual marriage.*

OR: Paul *may* have had a concept of homosexual orientation, but here he *specifically* speaks to heterosexuals, as he states they have 'abandoned' or 'given up' heterosexual practice. This prohibition therefore is not relevant to sex arising out of a different orientation. *Some have suggested he was addressing groups of women whose husbands were away on military matters for long periods, so took up with each other in their absence (there little evidence for this, but it is a plausible hypothesis)*

OR: The issue is *lust* not orientation. Any sex that is exploitative, where one partner uses the other for sexual gratification without acknowledging their full God-loved personhood, is not in line with God's intentions. Paul's concern here, as in Corinthians and Timothy, is at people whose sexual urges are out of control, resulting in harm to others.

Talk about 'natural' raises the issue of **Genesis**: do the creation accounts preclude homosexuality as part of God's good order?

Traditional view: 'Male and female they were created' (Gen 1) means that anything else comes after the 'Fall' and is a result of sin. 'For this reason a man shall leave his parents and he and his wife become one flesh' (Gen 2) indicates marriage to be intended as the re-unification of male and female (separated in creating Eve from Adam); As marriage is throughout the bible shown as the only legitimate place for sex, therefore any sex not within marriage is contrary to God's intention at creation; As only heterosexual relationships count as 'marriage', homosexual sex is therefore precluded. Jesus by referring to this Genesis passage when teaching against divorce (Mt 19/ Mk 10) reaffirms this understanding of marriage/ sex. *Some traditional views hold that sex even within marriage is only for procreation. Until 1958 Anglican doctrine formally prohibited recreational sex even within marriage, therefore homosexual sex by nature was viewed as unacceptable.*

Alternate readings: Genesis is an account of 'where we came from', so naturally talks in terms of male+female, and relationships for procreation. Establishing this as 'normal' does not therefore mean alternatives are *wrong*. They can equally be minority expressions that are not 'the norm' but also good. *'We normally come to church through the tunnel, but sometimes there are road-works so we take the Narrows.'*

The emphasis of Genesis is that God created all, God created us sexual beings, and that God saw ALL that was created as GOOD. If I consider my heterosexuality as part of my God-created self, how can I ask an LGBTIQ+ person to see this part of themselves as *not* created by God? My heterosexuality is not just attraction to the opposite sex, it is a desire to fulfil that: to have sex, not just think about it; to seek lasting male sexual companionship, not just identify as theoretically heterosexual. For me, the heart of Genesis, the God-made-us-good core, was the deal-breaker changing my theology to full acceptance of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Because I could not ask of others what I would never ask of myself.

How do we decide how to go forward? Cathy Thomson and Don Edwards suggest three guiding principles:

- Human consequences of any ethical pronouncement must be considered
- Ethics must consider relationships rather than isolated moral acts
- Remember that Jesus' had a tendency to challenge norms in order to create a radical inclusive community with special consideration for the marginalised

We need to acknowledge that there is an internally consistent argument for condemning homosexual practice based on the bible. I have held to that view in the past and, much as it pains me, it is a valid reading of the bible. If it is your reading, however, it is not enough to end there. You also need to:

- Take seriously the teachings of Jesus (and the whole bible) that call for attention to the marginalised, the oppressed, the broken-hearted. *Suicide statistics are a clear indication that this includes LGBTIQ+ individuals.*
- Ensure that you hear the stories of actual people, not just theories, as Jesus clearly always considered individuals not blanket groupings in making his own ethical decisions.
- Acknowledge that your reading is selective in which parts of the bible you emphasise – as is any reading. *As was the selection of texts read in the service, which supported MY understanding of what is core in the bible.*

We also need to acknowledge that the traditional reading is not the *only* valid reading. It is possible to affirm the bible as important and also affirm LGBTQ+ sexual practice, and I hope today has given some clues to how that might hold together. That doesn't end the story, though. It is easy to use this sort of re-interpretation of biblical texts to absolve ourselves of needing to do anything.

- If Sodom is not about sex but about hospitality, how am I taking hospitality seriously?
- If Romans is calling for each of us to act out of our God-created orientation, how am I living true to that? Who am I created to be and how am I living that with integrity?
- The bible may not condemn homosexual practice, but it does include sexual ethics, which apply to you whether you are straight or gay: ensuring sex is not exploitative; holding sex within committed relationships; being respectful of your own and others' creation as sexual beings.
- The bible also calls for unity and love among Christians. How are you going to love and be in communion with those who hold a more traditional reading?

For others, it doesn't matter what the bible says, so much of today is a curiosity. But if you wish to be followers of Jesus, I think you need to take seriously that you are bound together with others also on that path, including others for whom the bible is absolutely central to faith.

- How are you living out Jesus' call to love one another in communion with those who cherish this book?
- How are you demonstrating Jesus' compassion, self-giving and sacrificial love for ALL people?

I do not know for sure what God thinks of homosexual sex. I also do not know for sure what God thinks of the specifics of my own sex life. But in anything where I cannot be sure, I think James' Forbes suggestion is appropriate: to 'err on the side of helping hurting people, and pray for mercy'

Readings used in the service:

Gen 1:26-31; 2:18-24) – God made us good, and God made us not to be alone

Romans 12: 3-5 - don't think you're better; each of us is different and wonderful

Ps 139: 1-3, 13-14 – we are fearfully and wonderfully made

Luke 12:54-57 - read the times, judge for yourselves what is upright

John 3:16-17 – Jesus came to save, not to condemn

Gal 5:1 - Christ set us free, so remain free

John 15:12, 17:20-23 - love one another; Jesus prays that his followers may be one in love

References to the relationship between David and Jonathon:

1 Sam 18:1 *When David finished talking to Saul, Jonathon felt an instant affection for David; Jonathon loved him like his very self.*

1 Sam 3 *Jonathon made a pact with David, since he loved him like his very self. (gives his clothes, armour, sword)*

1 Sam 19 Jonathon intercedes with Saul to save David's life

1 Sam 20 Jonathon helps David escape [20:17 *Jonathon then renewed his oath to David, since he loved him like his very soul; 20:30 (Saul speaks) Don't I know that you side with the son of Jesse to your own shame and your mother's dishonour? 20:42 (Of D&J, when it is clear David must leave) They then embraced each other, both weeping copiously]*

1 Sam 23:15-18 Jonathon risks his life to visit David on the run, and encourage him.

2 Sam 1 (David sings of Jonathon's death) *Jonathon, by your dying I too am stricken, I am desolate for you, Jonathon my brother. Very dear you were to me, your love more wonderful to me than the love of a woman.*

2 Sam 9:1-13 David takes in Jonathon's crippled son and treats him kindly [v.7 *I will treat you with faithful love for your father Jonathon's sake.*]