

## **Why Evangelicals must think again about homosexuality**

I believe there are at least three reasons why evangelicals must think again about homosexuality:

Because Christian hostility towards homophile relationships rests on an interpretation of the Bible which is in many respects open to question.

Because there is a diversity of opinion among Christians about the issue which will cause division within the churches unless an attitude of greater tolerance and mutual respect prevails.

Because current pastoral practice is damaging homosexual Christians and so alienating the gay community generally that evangelism is impossible.

All these three arguments will undoubtedly be challenged by evangelicals wishing to maintain the traditional position.

Against (1), they will insist that the Bible unambiguously declares that all homosexual genital acts are sinful; any contrary reading involves distorting the plain sense of the text.

Against (2), they will observe that Christian tradition on this matter is unanimous and schism may be necessary to preserve the moral purity of the church.

Against (3), they will protest that, since homosexual acts are sinful, responsible pastoral practice and evangelism must call upon gay men and women to renounce such immorality as an inescapable part of the cost of Christian discipleship.

It would require a book to fully respond to these objections; this essay sets itself the more modest task of highlighting a couple of key issues in the debate.

## **EROS AND CREATION**

The account of human sexuality provided by the book of Genesis displays many facets. At the simplest level it is clearly related to the mandate to "multiply". Sexual reproduction is one of the many features which the human race has in common with the animal world. But the linkage of the phrase "male and female" to "the image of God", together perhaps with the unexpected first-person plural verb "let us make", suggests that there is something distinctive about human sexuality too ( see Genesis 1:26-27). Looking back at this ancient text from a Christian perspective, it is tempting to speculate that a single human individual cannot fully reflect the complexity of God's likeness. Augustine long ago made this suggestion in his discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity. If love is an essential part of the divine being, he reasoned, then there must of necessity be Another who is the eternal object of that love. And if humankind is to "image" such a God, then inter-personal relationship must be intrinsic to our existence too.

This insight seems to be confirmed by the complementary account of creation provided in Genesis 2. God, we are told, was strangely sympathetic to the loneliness of Adam, observing that within the universe he had so conspicuously pronounced "good" there was, nevertheless, a significant omission. "It was not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis

2:18). In the following verses we are given another account of the purpose of sexuality: not procreation this time but companionship. A companionship, indeed, that goes much deeper than any that could be provided by the animal world because it has a profoundly organic, "one flesh" dimension to it. Paul, once again reflecting on this text with the benefit of Christian hindsight, comments that there is a "mystery" involved here. Sexual union, he claims, foreshadows the intimate relationship Christ desires to have with his Church (Ephesians 5:31-32; note also I Corinthians 6:15-17). So it may not be too much to say, as in fact the Catholic tradition always has, that human sexuality possesses a sacramental significance. It communicates spiritual realities in a physical and symbolic way, and in so doing it provides us with the verbal and emotional vocabulary to understand something of the heart of God.

It comes as no surprise, then, that there is a "mystic" dimension to sex that often links it to religious experience in some way. To identify this connection, the Greeks employed the word "eros". Plato in his "Symposium" uses this term for the compelling desire for divine things, and in the later mystery religions it describes a state of ecstatic union with divinity. Catholic mystics in the mediaeval period often described their spiritual experiences in unmistakably erotic language. And Puritan commentaries on the Song of Solomon spiritualised that poetic celebration of "eros" so that it became a vehicle for expressing devotion to Christ. Evangelical hymn-books still display the influence of this tradition. Take the following lines, for instance:

I lift my heart to thee, Saviour Divine; for thou art all to me, and I am thine. Is there on earth a closer bond than this: that my Beloved's mine and I am his?

To summarise then, human sexuality was not exclusively designed by our Creator to foster procreative male-female bonds. Rather, as creatures made in the image of an inter-personally related God, our animal sex-drive was spiritually elevated into "eros", an innate desire for an intimate bonding relationship with another person, which finds its ultimate fulfilment in union with Christ.

## EROS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND THE BIBLE

It is clear that within the human population there is a substantial minority who develop erotic feelings for the same sex. To use vocabulary that was not available to the biblical authors, such individuals have a homosexual orientation.

Orientation must not be confused with behaviour. Heterosexual individuals may in certain circumstances engage in genital homosexual acts e.g. in a single-sex social environment like a prison, the navy, or a boarding school. Similarly homosexual individuals, under certain kinds of pressure, may marry and have children.

Neither is it correct to view orientation as simply a matter of "preference". As we have already said, "eros" is driven by a deep psychosexual need for intimacy with another human individual. In terms of the Genesis account, although procreation clearly requires a male-female pair, the experience of profound companionship which is the deeper purpose of sexuality does not. For some individuals this is found in same-sex relationships.

Many Christians wish to argue that such homosexual feelings are implicitly disordered and should therefore be denied expression. They insist that God's creation intention was that

the need for erotic intimacy should be satisfied only within heterosexual marriage ("For this reason..." Genesis 2:24). This verdict is often further supported by appeal to Romans 1:24-27, where Paul (it is argued) specifically identifies homosexuality as contrary to "nature" (i.e. the created order). A handful of other passages are also frequently used to defend this traditional view (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, I Corinthians 6:10 and I Timothy 1:10).

A great deal can be said in response to this. Here we indicate a few of the general areas that require further development and deliberation.

## 1. Genesis :

The Genesis account is not quite as definitive as some evangelicals suggest. Adam and Eve were alone in the garden. We are given no hint as to what same-sex relationships in Edenic innocence would have looked like. They were also in a probationary state, faced with a choice between the tree of life and of knowledge. We are not told what transformation in human society would have been brought about if they had chosen wisely.

We do, however, have certain indications that sexuality will operate in a very different way in the restored creation of the world-to-come, perhaps because there will then be no need for procreation (see Matthew 22:30). Some authors have also drawn attention to the unexpected conjunction in Galatians 3:28, "no longer male and female" (not "nor"—though most translations ignore the subtle change in Paul's vocabulary). If this is a deliberate allusion to Genesis 1, it implies that the creation order in regard to heterosexual pair-

bonding has been radically relativised by the coming of the Kingdom of God. Both Jesus and Paul certainly seem far less obsessed with "family values" than many contemporary evangelicals.

To suggest, then, that there is something inherently sinful about a desire for same-sex intimacy goes beyond the evidence provided by Genesis 1 and 2 and provides little framework for understanding the tenderness and covenant commitment of David and Jonathan ( I Samuel 18:1-4, II Samuel:26) or Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17).

In any case, we are not living in the Garden of Eden anymore. Even if it were true that heterosexual monogamy would be the only form of eroticism expressed in a unfallen world, we have to cope with the disorder and brokenness of the Fall. One of the things that, according to Genesis, was affected seriously by the primeval sin of the human race is the sexual dynamics of human relationships (Genesis 3:16 ). Jesus indicated that divorce was an example of the kind of pragmatic concession that is sometimes necessary in such an imperfect world (Matthew 19:8). It is at least arguable that homosexuality should be regarded in a similar way.

## 2. Leviticus :

The Leviticus passages fall in the midst of the Holiness Code, a list of precepts intended to define the way ancient Israel should be different from her neighbours. It includes several different kinds of regulations. Many are clearly religious, forbidding the practice of pagan idolatry (18:21, 19:4) and ordering the cultic ritual of the Tabernacle or Temple (19:5-8). Others are moral and have to do with issues of social justice or crime (19:13-16, 33-36). Still others may well reflect a concern for public health (18:19). And some seem designed simply to mark out Jews as culturally distinctive (20:25-26).

Although the New Testament affirms the continuing relevance of the Mosaic Law in general terms (Matthew 5:17-20), it is clear that substantial parts of it were abrogated or fulfilled by Jesus in a way that renders them obsolete for Gentile believers (Mark 7:1-5, 17-19; Acts 10:9-

15; Acts 15).

As a result, the interpretation of Leviticus for a modern Christian is notoriously difficult. It is vital to make a sound decision about the original purpose of any particular levitical law, since this crucially affects the way it should be applied to contemporary society. The schism within the churches over the Sabbath is a good example of the kind of controversy that has resulted from Christians applying OT laws with wooden literalism.

As far as the two texts in Leviticus that are held to prohibit homosexuality are concerned, there are at least two possible rationales which accord with the general purpose of the Holiness Code. The first is that homoerotic behaviour was associated with paganism in the ancient world and that the prohibition is, therefore, basically cultic. Alternatively, the intention of the two texts may have been simply to prohibit anal intercourse (literally: lying with a man "in the same way" as with a woman). The rationale for this could have been public hygiene or a general antagonism to non-procreative sex in a situation where population growth was vital for the nation's survival. Leviticus displays a general concern for the preservation of patrilineal inheritance of the land which probably informs much of the legislation covering the use of the male seed.

These two possible understandings of the Leviticus texts are supported by the identification of homosexual acts as "abomination" (hebrew: to'eba) — a word usually implying an idolatrous offence or some breach of ritual purity. In either case, the texts are not proscribing homoerotic relationships as such, only a certain kind of sexual behaviour which may be qualified by the changed circumstances of the modern world where health risks and the birth rate are better understood and controlled, and where sex is no longer associated with popular fertility religions. Many levitical commands, of course, are widely ignored by evangelicals on the grounds that they are culturally anachronistic (e.g. the death penalty for adultery or disobedience to parents).

### 3. Paul :

Paul's comments in Romans 1 clearly reflect the moral decadence of the ancient pagan world. He may, for instance, have in mind the orgiastic lust and bizarre cross-dressing that characterised a number of religious cults in his day. He certainly is not describing the kind of loving and committed homosexual friendships between Christian brothers or sisters with which the modern church is familiar.

As for the reference to "nature", it is by no means clear that this word should be identified with "the creation order" in Pauline usage. In I Corinthians 11:14 for example, "nature" clearly alludes to the cultural appropriacy of certain hairstyles. Given the Gentile-Jew debate which forms the background to Romans, it is quite possible that Paul's comments in chapter 1 reflect Leviticus rather than Genesis. If so, Paul's words reflect the ritual uncleanness of anal intercourse, both heterosexual (1:26—which on this interpretation does not refer to lesbianism) and homosexual (1:27) in the Jewish mind.

The Pauline references in I Corinthians 6 and I Timothy 1 hinge on the meaning of two disputed words: malachoi and arsenokoitai. The first, meaning literally "soft ones", does

not necessarily relate to sexual behaviour at all. It could, for instance, refer to effeminacy in dress or manner. The second may well be a deliberate echoing in Greek of the Hebrew text of Leviticus 18:21. It is a very rare word, but seems always to be associated with sins of exploitation and abuse rather than sexual immorality per se.

There are strong grounds, then, for believing that these two words are heavily laden with cultural connotations specific to the first century pagan world where, for instance, male prostitution and pederasty were widespread. Certainly to translate them "homosexuals" begs an enormous number of questions, and is in any case thoroughly anachronistic since the notion of sexual orientation did not exist before modern times.

#### 4. Jesus :

Jesus famously provided a hermeneutic tool to help his followers to negotiate their way through moral debates about OT law. He identified one levitical command as the key to understanding the rationale behind all the others: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:31; Matthew 22:39-40 - quoting Lev. 19:18). Paul, too, affirms the same insight (Romans 13:9-10 and Galatians 5:14). This suggests that, when trying to determine why an OT law was given and what its relevance is to a modern Christian, two vital questions must be asked:

"What harm to neighbour was this command intended to prevent?"

"What good to neighbour was this command intended to promote?"

Indeed, similar enquiry into the original purpose of law underlies the science of jurisprudence generally. The radical consequences which resulted from Jesus looking at the Sabbath in this way are clear in the Gospels. He flagrantly disregarded the onerous rabbinical interpretations of what Sabbath observance required, on the grounds that the institution was intended to be a blessing not a burden (Mark 2:27). The application of the same interpretive principles to Leviticus 18:21 and 19:4 might similarly lead to more compassionate conclusions regarding homosexuality.

It is certainly very difficult to see in what way a total ban on all expressions of homoerotic affection should be demanded as a rational expression of neighbour love.

## SCIENCE, SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE CHURCH

Modern science has thrown new light on the "nature" of many things which were not properly understood in ancient times. Biblical interpretation must take into account the way divine inspiration accommodated itself to the pre-modern world-view of its original authors, even when their culture was ignorant or misinformed.

Demon possession is a good example of this. Ancient culture clearly had the wrong idea about mental illness, yet the Bible does not attempt to correct it. Whilst not totally dismissing what the Bible says about the subject, therefore, we must not assume that it provides us with an accurate explanation of mental disorder. In the same way, we now understand the phenomenon of homosexuality much better than we used to do, and this new psychological knowledge must inform our interpretation and application of the biblical text. To refuse to allow such a revision would be fundamentalist obscurantism of a

particularly dangerous kind because, like the issue of mental illness, it has serious pastoral implications.

There are, in fact, three ways in which our modern understanding of homosexual orientation could be integrated within a conventional evangelical theology of creation and fall:

- it could be seen as innocuous: part of the potential for human diversity which is intrinsic in the divine creation (like left-handedness).
- it could be seen as regrettable: an aspect of natural disorder brought into the world by the Fall (like congenital defect).
- it could be condemned: a sinful desire reflecting the moral corruption of the human race since the Fall (like lust or greed).

Whichever of these alternatives is embraced, the fact is homosexual orientation exists. Its origin has not yet been discovered. Numerous possibilities have been discussed including: a genetic predisposition; an abnormal hormone flux in the womb; and remote or over-intense relationships with one or both parents. The jury is still out on this debate, but the psychological evidence unambiguously indicates that orientation is fixed at a very early age and is immutable. The most that the so-called ex-gay movement has demonstrated is temporary modification of behaviour in a handful of cases, sustained by substantial social rewards. They have produced no evidence that anyone's orientation can be changed and there are plenty of gay Christians around who can testify to the damage which the futile quest for "healing" through such groups has caused them. A pragmatic pastoral response to this situation is required, therefore, whatever one's views on the interpretation of the biblical texts or on how the scientific facts are to be integrated into our systematic theology.

For homosexual Christians themselves, the traditional teaching of evangelical churches on sexuality generates a profound contradiction between faith and experience. On the one hand, they are believers who have known the power of the Word and the Spirit of God in their lives. On the other hand, they long for fulfilment of their God-given potential for "eros" through an intimate relationship with another person of the same sex. As in the case of heterosexuals, few are gifted with celibacy. Sadly, for many the only way to resolve the cognitive dissonance to which evangelicalism has subjected them is to move theologically in the direction of liberal, catholic or explicitly gay churches. The issue of homosexuality has undoubtedly been a reason some now dub themselves "post-evangelicals".

Schism within the church and defection from it on these grounds, however, is a very new phenomenon. Homosexually-oriented individuals have always existed, of course, but in earlier days they were socialised in a different way. Marriage was a much less romantically idealised institution. Its purpose was mainly procreative and economic. Consequently, same-sex friendships could be a more important feature in people's lives and the boundary between "philia" and "eros" was more easily blurred. It was thus possible for homosexuals to marry and to discharge all the socially expected obligations to their wives and children, while retaining discreet but intimate extra-marital same-sex friendships. There were also places within the Christian community where remaining unmarried was considered a virtue. Homosexual Christians thus found privacy and refuge in monastic orders or among the ordained clergy.

Today, in a way quite unparalleled in earlier centuries, homosexual people are identifying themselves as a distinct group (hence the emergence of the very words "homosexual" and "heterosexual") and are exploiting the new vocabulary of human rights to develop a more satisfactory model for their social existence. Although this change could only now be

reversed by monstrous acts of fanaticism and oppression, conservative religious groups are responding to it in a very defensive manner. As a result, Christian homosexuals, who formerly would have remained "in the closet" protected by a conspiracy of sympathetic silence, have little choice but to "come out". For most this has been a profoundly liberating experience, in spite of the bullying hostility to which they have often been subjected. In many ways their experience has run parallel, if a little behind, that of Christian women in the last few decades. In the wake of the secular feminist movement, women have found a new confidence to claim a role for themselves within the church. They have developed a hermeneutic to deal with the biblical texts which had been used to deny them that role in the past. Of course, this was not achieved without resistance from a conservative rump mainly within the older ecclesiastical establishment, but the majority of evangelicals have now moved very substantially in the direction of welcoming women into Christian leadership. Gay Christians are using exactly the same kind of hermeneutic tools to challenge tradition in regard to homosexuality. If it is taking them rather longer to succeed than the Christian feminists did, this has more to do with the inferiority of their numerical strength than of the justice of their cause.

## WHAT SHOULD EVANGELICALS DO?

Evangelical churches are faced with a number of searching questions.

How certain are they that their understanding of the Bible on this issue is correct?

What harm would it do to the doctrine and practice of Christianity if gay Christians were given the benefit of the doubt?

Can we, with biblical consistency, relax tradition on the role of women and yet refuse to do so in the case of gays?

What damage will be done to the cause of the gospel by appearing to side with the forces of conservative prejudice against a group that is widely acknowledged to have been unfairly marginalised and oppressed in the past? This is, after all, an issue of ethics, not fundamental doctrine. Many would argue that the Bible only ever teaches morality indirectly, because its overall intention is not moralistic. The Bible is a book of faith. The opposite of a saint is not a sinner but an unbeliever. The Bible's purpose is to give us a faith perspective on life in the broad sweep of its revelatory story; but the concrete particulars of the morality it presents en passant cannot be ours without it being passed through a hermeneutic filter involving an understanding of the difference of historical horizons. Thus its prohibitions have an orienting authority without always demanding that we follow them to the letter. In fact, the legalistic literalism demonstrated by some right-wing evangelicals is actually a way of avoiding guilt, in much the same way that Nazi officers did so at Nuremberg, by claiming they are just following orders. Rather, we are called to take responsibility for difficult decisions which arise when we try to apply the Bible sensibly to a contemporary world which is very different from the one in which Moses and Jesus lived.

In this respect it is arguable that many Christians have for too long used the Bible like Pharisees, wishing to define righteousness by a list of right and wrong acts (i.e. law). It may be that an excessively judicial view of the atonement has reinforced this: a punitive "father" accepts the sacrifice of a victimised "son" to discharge the moral debt of others.

But God and Jesus were "one" in the atonement. What we see on the cross is precisely the "sin" which that kind of legalistic "righteousness" perpetrates!

"We have a law and by that law he ought to die" .

In situations of ethical uncertainty Christians have always recognised the need to make judgements based on the optimisation of consequences. The consequences of the current orthodox position on homosexuality is proving pastorally disastrous. If nothing else, then, it surely ought to be possible to achieve some kind of rapprochement between traditional and gay evangelicals on a "lesser of two evils" basis. The latter do not ask for universal approval, after all. They recognise that opinion is sharply divided within the churches. They seek simply for tolerance on pragmatic grounds. They believe this debate should be conducted, like those over nuclear weapons, divorce, abortion and women's ordination, within the unbroken fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The closet is emptying and they do not wish to be forced into gay or liberal churches as a result. Their heart lies within the Bible-

believing circles in which they found Christ and learned to love him.

All they ask, then, is that their fellow evangelicals think again.

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