

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE BIBLE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Preamble

The area of human sexuality has become one of, if not the, most contentious issue within the Anglican Church. Four events have contributed to this, in order:

- The 1998 Lambeth Conference and its concordat on human sexuality
- Same-sex unions in the Diocese of New Westminster
- The Reading election in the Church of England
- The New Hampshire election in ECUSA

It is worth considering what the Bible, or sections of it, may or may not say, and setting out some caveats and boundaries. Ultimately this is an issue of hermeneutics, and on Canon. For many arguments depend on how the Bible is interpreted, and on which sections of it are given priority. In this paper a number of the different arguments are outlined. In addition to this, the following submission rests on the proviso that the different sections of Scripture should be understood in their respective contexts. As we support local and contextual theology in our understanding of mission, so, it seems, can we make a case for the contextual study of Scripture. The task of the contemporary interpreter then becomes one of “dynamic equivalence”, translating what Scripture meant to the people of God in their context to contemporary Christians in their very different context.

The following areas are set out for discussion:

1. “Homosexuality”
2. The Ancient World: the Context for Scripture
3. Using the Torah
4. Using the New Testament

“Homosexuality”

The first point that needs to be made is that what the modern world calls “homosexuality” is a modern description. Our modern usage stems from the 19th century and has been shaped especially by modern scientific research. Kenneth Dover’s important study *Greek Homosexuality* takes great care over this. His research quarries through texts from the ancient Greek world, in particular from 5th-4th century Athens. His research also suggests that the physical expressions of same sex relations were different: inter-crural intercourse is described at length.

Homosexuality, according to Dover, is most often the relationship between an older man and a youth, it has an educational dimension. It also provides the forum for romance, choice and love which were restricted in heterosexual relationships (to use the modern term as a shorthand) in the “purdah” society of Ancient Athens. The senior practitioners might well have been married, making “bisexual” a more accurate term.

In short, to search Scriptures for a definitive view of the modern condition described as “homosexuality” is liable to be fruitless. This is not, however, to say that Scripture is redundant on this subject any more than it is redundant on specifically modern issues. It suggests that such an approach is more appropriate than a search for a definitive proof-text.

The Ancient World: the Context for Scripture

The ancient context, or rather contexts, of Scripture need to be considered carefully. Hebrew, Greek and Roman society may have been inter-related from an early period (7th century BC by some estimates), but all maintained individual emphases. These emphases also vary from period to period. Camille Paglia, the American academic and critic, has memorably likened one widely-acclaimed study of “homosexuality” in the ancient world as muddling up finely-detailed texts from different eras of Greek history to gravel being dumped off a truck. What is the upshot of this? Simply, that the context of each text needs to be considered closely. Let’s look at an example of the “gravel-truck” approach. In this, the following generalisation is

made: references to homosexuality refer to male cult prostitution which was commonly practised in the ancient world. Note the following:

- 1) Where is the evidence for "wide practice"? The wider criticism suggests that even if practised this may not have been a widespread enough practice to make it the centre of the criticism.
- 2) Roman attitudes and religious practices differed from Greek. Corinth suffers especially from the failure to observe this. Corinth is routinely described as a hot-bed of sexual vice, sometimes connected to the cults (usually different-sex activity). True to an extent. But these descriptions come from the time of Greek Corinth which was flattened in the 140s BC. The Roman colony was different (Fitzmyer:Romans, p.275-6). If we are to generalise it would be to say that male-male activity was viewed with much more distaste by Roman commentators of a number of periods than their Greek counterparts.

So, when someone makes a sweeping statement we are entitled to ask how thoroughly they have examined the actual context of the Scripture passage. The answer is, regrettably, often less than necessary. An extreme example is found in Horner: *Jonathan Loved David* in which the evidence cited for widespread lesbianism in 1st century Rome is the *Kama Sutra*: this smacks of desperation

Using the Torah

Perhaps the most fraught area of the discussion is the use of passages from the *Torah*. *Gen 3* and the *Lev* proscriptions figure highly. The use of select ideas from *Lev*. is most squabbled over, and easily dealt with by critics who note that many of the other proscriptions about diet, clothing and punishments are overlooked on a daily basis. Attempts to justify the maintenance of *Lev* proscriptions on the basis of the Sermon of the Mount can be played off against the Council of Jerusalem in *Acts 15*.

Care also needs to be taken in using *Gen 3*: it is a positive description of marriage and family relationship, yet it is dangerous to begin to imply something is condemned on the basis of non-conformity with the passage. These are inferences, or arguments from silence at best. On a similar procedural basis one might argue that, from *Titus*, all bishops must be married. This might solve the immediate problem, but would not be a correct use of Scripture.

Using the New Testament

Whatever the view taken of the place of exact adherence to the proscriptions of *Torah*, there are verses of the NT which appear to condemn "homosexuality".

I intend to look at *Rom 1:26-7*. The texts focus not on human conditions, but on particular **acts**. Thus there is no condemnation of homosexuality as a human state, but there is condemnation of some of the activities associated with same-sex practices. Martin:*Novum Testamentum* 1993 has gone further, in a fascinating contextual study, arguing that what is condemned here is not homosexuality, but rather the activities of penetrative anal and oral sexual intercourse be they same- or different-sex.

The condemnation of these acts in a religious context has erroneously been taken to assume cultic sexual activity.

Paul sees these actions as the *result* of a disordered spirituality, not its cause (which would rather be the case of cultic activity). For Paul, disorder is rooted in idolatry, and humanity's fallen nature, and this is manifested, as the end of the chapter makes clear, by a number of other disordered human activities.

Paul's real interest is not curing of the results of disorder and idolatry, but in correcting the root cause, that is, the idolatry itself. An analogy might be a modern society which needs to stamp out theft and robbery, by engaging with the drug abuse which causes much of this activity, not just the activities.

There is, of course, a sting in the tail. The results of the disorder still remain under condemnation. If Martin is right, that affects both same- and different- sex practices. These have not, in Paul's way of thinking, suddenly become morally acceptable or neutral.

And, here, to me lies the root of the problem. It is not a question of whether the Scriptures are scientific enough, or modern enough. It is a question of whether we agree with the analysis of humanity given by Paul and the conclusions he reaches from it.