

Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

Homosexuality and the Church

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Introduction

There is a widespread acceptance of homosexual orientation and practice in our popular culture, the media, in British law and in many parts of the Church – even the 'evangelical' church. This means that we can neither assume the traditional consensus nor ignore the issue.

Key points for consideration

- The distinction between homosexual *orientation* (or inclination) and homosexual *practice* – usually unrecognised in contemporary debate.
- Sexuality is a spectrum from a completely heterosexual to a completely homosexual orientation.
- Most of this discussion will apply equally to gay men and to lesbians, although their situations are not identical. However, around 80% of homosexual acts occur between males, both because the incidence of homosexuality among men is higher and because male homosexuals tend to be more promiscuous than among females.

Historical Overview

The traditional Christian view of homosexuality is that the Bible clearly prohibits same-sex sexual relationships. This view has been held with almost complete unanimity since apostolic times until the last few decades.

In 1948, the Kinsey Report asserted that around 10% of people were homosexual. This figure is still quoted even though it has long been shown to be greatly exaggerated. However, it seemed to establish the existence of a large minority of active homosexuals. This paved the way, both in the USA and in Britain, for the emergence of a gay rights lobby. In 1967 homosexuality was decriminalised in Britain and since then there have been further moves to give homosexuals the same rights as heterosexuals in every area, including employment rights and family law. Meanwhile, a 'revisionist' view was taking shape in the Church – an attempt to legitimise homosexual relationships among Christians. Among liberals this is easy, because they can argue that sexual morality need not be determined by the Bible. In 1976 the 'Gay Christian Movement' (later becoming the 'Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement') appeared. More relevant is the change of attitude among some professing evangelicals. The key book here, which has been very influential, is Michael Vasey's *Strangers and Friends*, Hodder and Stoughton – the first book written from an allegedly evangelical standpoint to advocate the recognition of homosexual relationships.

The revisionist approach to the key biblical texts, typified by Vasey, is to take them in isolation and then to deny their applicability to homosexual relationships today. For the Old Testament texts, this is done either by declaring them to be relevant only to their original culture (Leviticus) or to have been grossly mis-applied (Genesis 19 and Judges 19). For the New Testament texts, the meaning of the key words is restricted (1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy), the reference to

homosexuality is denied (2 Peter and Jude) or the argument is made into a rhetorical device (Romans). There is also a tendency greatly to over-complicate the plain meaning of texts. Hints of homosexual relationships or homoerotic behaviour are read into various stories, especially (but not only) that of David and Jonathan. It is alleged that Jesus' non-judgemental approach in his ministry (woman taken in adultery) must mean he was tolerant of homosexuality.

The revisionist view tends to portray an idealised picture of homosexual relationships and underplays the prevalence of extreme promiscuity and the rarity of long-term 'monogamous' relationships in the homosexual community. Vasey, for example, is astonishingly optimistic about the attitudes and outlook of typical gay men. In summary: if it is loving, caring and committed, it is OK with God.

The Situation Today

Surveys quoted by Schmidt (from secular sources) demonstrate:

- The incidence of homosexual practice is far lower than suggested by the Kinsey Report. In any one year, probably around 1% of adults are homosexually active. Fewer than 0.5% are bisexually active in any one year.
- The vast majority of homosexual sex occurs outside stable partnerships, especially among males. The level of promiscuity is astonishingly high – one survey found that 74% of male homosexuals reported over 100 lifetime sexual partners. Lifelong faithfulness is almost non-existent, in contrast to the impression often given by the media.
- The homosexual health crisis is far wider than AIDS and includes both physical and mental illnesses. Schmidt's summary of what would be expected in a typical group of ten homosexual men (in America) in their mid-30s:
 - 4 out of 10 are currently in a relationship, but only one is faithful to his partner.
 - 4 out of 10 have never had a relationship lasting over a year. Only one has ever had a relationship of over 3 years.
 - 6 out of 10 are regularly having sex with strangers. The group averages two partners per person each month.
 - 3 out of 10 are alcoholics and 5 have a history of alcohol abuse.
 - 4 out of 10 are heavily into drug abuse.
 - 4 out of 10 have suffered acute depression and 3 have contemplated suicide.
 - 8 out of 10 will have experienced some sexually transmitted disease other than HIV/AIDS.
 - 3 out of 10 have been HIV infected and one has AIDS.
- The incidence of paedophile activity among homosexual men is considerably higher than among heterosexuals. However, only a small proportion of homosexuals are prone to paedophilia.

Biblical Evidence

Seven key texts are usually quoted in support of the traditional view of homosexuality. However, beware of confining attention to a few texts in isolation from the rest of the biblical story-line. The consistent witness of Scripture is that the only place for the full expression of human sexuality is within heterosexual marriage. It is intended to express complementarity between men and women – an 'otherness' denied by the homosexual union, which involves an opposing view of the values of reproduction, complementarity and responsibility.

Revisionists often argue that even if Scriptural injunctions against homosexual behaviour do still apply, they are confined to the actions of perverts and not inverts, or 'natural' homosexuals. It is contended that in biblical times there was no concept of a true homosexual orientation: if there had been, the Bible would not have condemned loving homosexual behaviour. This view is untenable:

- There *was* knowledge of the exclusively homosexual orientation in the Greek world.
- Because sexuality is a continuum, it is difficult to sustain a clear separation between 'invert' and 'pervert' behaviour.
- The NT concentrates on *behaviour*, not inclination. This undercuts the distinction and places all homosexual behaviour in the category of moral abnormality.

The Key Texts

Genesis 19:1-13 and Judges 19 – Sodom and Gibeah.

Revisionist argument: in Gen 19:5 the word *yad'a*, which normally has the meaning 'to know', does not mean 'to have sex with', as usually translated. The hostile mob simply want to investigate the strangers whom Lot has welcomed and find out if they are spies.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

Revisionist argument: The relevance of these laws is confined to the culture in which they arose. The intention is simply to make Israel distinct from the nations among which she would dwell, the major concern being ritual purity rather than moral behaviour.

Romans 1:18–32.

Revisionist arguments:

Paul's strictures are directed against 'perverts' rather than 'inverts'.

Paul is setting up a rhetorical trap for complacent Jews by condemning something that was seen by first-century Jews as a particularly detestable and typically Gentile sin.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11.

Revisionist argument: The relevance of the condemnation is confined to homosexual prostitution and/or pederasty – it certainly does not exclude committed relationships between consenting adults.

There are a few other texts (such as 2 Peter 2:6–7 and Jude 7) which add to the picture but are of lesser importance.

Pastoral Practice: homosexuals in the church

Examining ourselves and our own attitudes

- Evangelical churches have undoubtedly been guilty of demonising homosexuals in the past and our critics have been justified in accusing us of fear and insecurity, as well as a lack of love, in the way we have approached the subject. The gay community definitely perceives us as hostile (consider the way the AIDS crisis was described as a 'gay plague' in its early days).
- We all experience the effects of the fall on our sexuality in various ways; and even if we have no struggles in the sexual arena (unlikely!), we all fail at many other points.
- It would probably take only one hostile comment to drive away most homosexuals who found their way into meetings of our church.

What alternative do we offer?

- We must avoid the impression that the only alternative lifestyle for gay men is the aggressive male competitiveness patterned in contemporary society. Rather, we must affirm the value of strong, same-sex friendships especially among men.
- We can offer *hope*. Christ is the answer to the deepest needs of men and women, whatever their background or favourite sins.
- Suggestions for evangelistic preaching on this subject:
 - Context:** the 'big picture' on creation and sexuality.
 - Community:** the church as the redeemed community showing relationships of beautiful integrity.
 - Christ Jesus:** both as the Way, Truth and Life and as perfect, celibate human male.

Conversion of an active homosexual

- Listen. Most will have experienced rejection and hostility, often from Christians; and the origins of their condition will vary and probably be complex.
- There is no godly alternative to clear counselling to *stop*, even though we will probably be asking the homosexual to withdraw from a very supportive network.
- Close support will be essential and will take up a great deal of time. God *does* heal people of their homosexual orientation, but rapid changes are rare. We can refer people to reliable Christian organisations such as the True Freedom Trust.

An actively homosexual Christian

- They may present themselves with defiance or in confusion when they discover our approach.

- Once again we should begin by listening.
- They should be taken through the Bible's teaching on homosexuality.
- Then they should be counselled as above.

Homosexual desires in a committed Christian

Homosexual Christians have to do something very difficult – resist their particular temptation. But in principle (though the temptations may be more severe) this is no different from the case of those given to violent temper, gossip, laziness - or singleness. Someone seeking help for this temptation is to be commended for his honesty and assured that many believers have major struggles against particular sins. Prayerful support within a relationship of accountability will help.

Discussion questions

How do we answer the following common revisionist arguments?

- Since God is love, he cannot possibly condemn any truly loving relationship.
- The Bible writers were not addressing the question of committed relationships between 'natural' homosexuals.
- The story of David and Jonathan has homoerotic features which the Bible does not condemn.

Scriptural Evidence

- Do Genesis 19 and Judges 19 in themselves prohibit gay sex?
- If we accept the 'absoluteness' of the prohibitions in Leviticus, why can we wear mixed fabrics but not own slaves?
- How important are the 'key texts' and how important is the overall scheme of Scriptural teaching in combating the revisionist line on homosexuality?
- How do we respond to the revisionist interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Tim 1:8-11?

Church life and attitudes

- John Stott: 'I rather think that the very existence of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, not to mention the "Evangelical fellowship" within it, is a vote of censure on the church'. Discuss.
- Different age-groups in our churches have grown up with vastly different cultural attitudes to homosexuality. How do we cope with this in our teaching on the subject?
- Other than preaching the 'seven key texts', which parts of Scripture or which doctrines provide opportunities for specific application to homosexuality?
- For a converted homosexual in church life:
What would we require before allowing him or her into church membership?
What questions would we ask and what would we need to guard against if he or she asked about getting married?
What accountability structures would we set up around his or her ministry in the church?

Recommended Reading

Homosexuality: The Straight Agenda, Brian Edwards (ed.), DayOne, 1998. [Note: the 'Courage Trust', recommended in Appendix A, has recently (2002) modified its stance to the point of accepting stable, long-term homosexual relationships as the 'lesser of two evils' in certain circumstances.]. This book is currently out of print and being revised.

'Sexuality' article and 'Homosexuality' entry in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, IVP, 1995.

Thomas Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexual Debate*, IVP, 1995.

David Peterson (ed.), *Holiness and Sexuality*, Paternoster, 2004.

Useful Organisations

True Freedom Trust. PO Box 3, Upton, Wirral, Merseyside L49 6NY. Phone 0151 653 0773. TFT offers counselling, advice, friendship, contact by correspondence and teaching.

Exodus International Europe. PO Box 407, Watford. EIE is made up of member organisations from various European countries.