

NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS RELATING TO HOMOSEXUALITY: EXEGESIS AND REFLECTIONS

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October, 2002

A. General Considerations

1. Homosexual behaviour is an extremely minor topic within the Bible overall. It is only mentioned in a very few verses.
2. It is important to remember that abstract concepts such as "sexuality", "heterosexuality", "homosexuality" and "sexual orientation" belong to the modern world. There are no exact equivalents for these concepts in the original languages in which the Bible was written (Hebrew and Greek). Indeed, as with so many other matters people in the ancient world thought about these topics rather differently than we do today.
3. In ancient Judaism it was assumed that sexual intercourse with the opposite sex was "natural" based on the "nature" of male and female physiology. This was connected with a general concern with fertility: the spilling of semen for any non-creative purposes (e.g. coitus interruptus [see Gen 38.1-11]) was regarded with disapproval. Moreover, Jews tended to associate homosexuality with pagan (i.e. non-Jewish) culture and behaviour.
4. Sex between members of the same sex was well known in the ancient world.
 - In classical (5th century BCE) Greece it was regarded quite positively. The writings of Plato and his contemporaries indicate that a prized relationship between a young man and an older teacher/mentor sometimes included sexual relations (pederasty).
 - Other ancient writings present a less favourable view. For example, a man who initiated sex with another man could be seen as intemperate, unable to control his sexual urges. Or the man who took the passive role in such relations would be characterized as effeminate in a pejorative sense.
5. Much less is known about female homosexuality in the ancient world. It is discussed infrequently in ancient texts.

B. New Testament Texts

1. **1 Corinthians 6:9-10 - A list of unacceptable behaviours.**

- Such lists were common in ancient Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian writings on morality. Paul is here reminding his audience of the kinds of behaviour an upright, respectable person would want to avoid.
- In 1 Cor 6.9-10, the fourth and fifth words in the list are usually considered pertinent. Unfortunately, most English versions translate these words inaccurately. The fourth word is malakoi, which refers to males who are “soft” or “effeminate”; it could refer to the passive partner in a male homosexual relationship. The fifth word in the list is arsenokoitai, which derives from the two Greek words for “male” and “bed”; it means something like “a male who lies with a male”. (The same word is also used in 1 Timothy 1:10).
- It is difficult to know more precisely what Paul had in mind in using these words. Probably it is best to see them in terms of Paul's Jewish background, i.e. the traditional Jewish prohibition against homosexuality.

2. **Romans 1:18-32 (especially 26-27) - Consequences of idolatry.**

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

- This is the most significant text relating to homosexuality in the New Testament. Paul focusses here on choices and behaviours, not what we today would see as “orientation”. Paul is condemning people who act contrary to their natures, “exchanging,” “giving up” their natural heterosexual behaviours for homosexual behaviours. Paul also emphasizes that these choices and behaviours are connected with lust (“passion”) rather than love, and that they result in divine condemnation.
- In the larger context of this passage (Romans 1.18-32) Paul focuses particularly on Gentiles. He argues that Gentiles have chosen to worship created things rather than the God who is behind creation. And from Paul's point of view this has had terrible consequences, resulting in all kinds of wicked deeds including homosexual and lesbian behaviour. (It is interesting that this is one of the very few references to lesbian relations in the literature of the ancient world.) Paul's perspective here clearly derives from his background in Judaism in which idolatry (false religion) was seen as the root of all sin and evil.

- However, it is important to note that in Romans 2 Paul goes on to argue that Jews have no right to pass judgment on Gentiles, and indeed that Jews are no better than Gentiles in the sight of God. The larger purpose of Paul's argument in the first three chapters of Romans is to show that all people -- Jews and Gentiles -- are without excuse before God. All of us are sinners, no one is naturally righteous before God, which is why we need the salvation that God gives freely by grace in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:9-24). Paul's overall goal in the first chapters of Romans is to show why Christ is necessary for all human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike. His assessment of Gentile behaviour in Rom 1.18-32 fuels this overall point that the Gospel is the universal answer for all humanity.

C. Summary

The few Biblical texts which relate directly to homosexuality understand homosexual behaviour negatively as a departure from the heterosexual structure of creation which is regarded as normative in the Bible. These Biblical texts reflect the traditional Jewish priority assigned to fertility and the association of homosexuality with idolatry (false religion).

For Lutherans, the most important question is: how can we interpret the Scriptures in relation to the Gospel, the Good News of God's unconditional love? In spite of the few passages that condemn homosexuality, welcoming gays and lesbians is certainly in keeping with the larger message of the Gospel and with Jesus' radical love for all people.

Some Lutherans today believe that the few references to homosexual behaviour in the Bible reflect their historical context and they question the relevance of these texts for homosexual orientation as we understand it today. In other words, these Lutherans believe that what the Bible says in these passages is fundamentally different from the reality of gay and lesbian Christians in committed, loving relationships.

On the other hand, other Lutherans want to accept the specific Biblical condemnations as still authoritative for Christians today. In that case, it is extremely important to remember the larger point of the Gospel. Paul's discussion in Romans 1-3 could be helpful here: we cannot pass judgment on others, for all of us are sinners who stand in need of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

D. Pastoral Reflections

The difference between the two points of view described in these last two paragraphs is such that they tend to become increasingly polarized, and even threaten to fracture the church. Thus a further question also faces us: is it possible to accept one another in the church even though we have different convictions with regard to the issue of homosexuality?

Dealing with a different situation that was not entirely dissimilar to our own, the apostle Paul wrote: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor 8.1). In that passage, Paul was addressing the issue of whether Christians should eat food that may have been offered to a pagan

god in the marketplace. Paul affirms that he personally doesn't believe there is anything wrong with eating such food (1 Cor 8.4-6; Rom 14.14). Paul knows where he stands on this issue and he confidently takes his stand on the Gospel. However, at the same time he also refuses to try to impose his personal Gospel-based conviction on those who disagree with him. Instead, Paul's main concern is with the unity of the church, and so he advises that those with convictions about this matter ought to *defer* to those with different convictions:

“But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ... when you thus sin against members of your family [the church], and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (1 Cor 8.9-13).

Who are the “weak” in any situation? In fact we *all* are, for we all “see in a mirror dimly” and we “know only in part” (1 Cor 13.12). Our knowledge about the issue of homosexuality is partial and incomplete. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8.1). It is easy to feel so sure of our own “knowledge” (about the issue of homosexuality or anything else) that we sit in judgment of one another and forget that Christ calls us to love one another -- especially those who see things differently from us -- in the church (1 Cor 13). This is vital to keep in mind as we in the Eastern Synod engage in studying the issue of homosexuality over the next two years.