

Sex, Orientation and Debate

- questions, experience and homosexuality

SEX AND ORIENTATION

What is sexual orientation?

The subject of sexual orientation raises strong feelings both amongst Christians and in society generally. It is of course vital that we approach the subject with sensitivity, bearing in mind that we are discussing real human experiences, including those of Christians. However, this should lead us to tackle the issues thoroughly and prayerfully, not to avoid them.

When the phrase “sexual orientation” is used, many people instinctively think of homosexuality. This is not surprising, given that the phrase comes up most often when discussing gay and lesbian people. However, it should be remembered that *everyone* has sexual orientation. It is about who or what we find sexually appealing and fulfilling, which may relate to what we find emotionally or spiritually fulfilling. Many Christians are happy to regard their sexuality as a gift from God.

Peer pressure and social expectations

In recent decades in Britain (and many other places) there have been considerable changes in social understandings of sexuality and relationships. However, much of society still regards as ideal the image of a heterosexual couple in a long-term monogamous relationship with children. In churches, this image is often even more idealised (with the addition that the couple are usually expected to have gone through a wedding ceremony).

Let us thank God that many people are blessed and fulfilled by such relationships. However, we must also see the dangers of regarding this as the “normal” relationship pattern when it applies to only a minority of society. Holding it up as the ideal (sometimes called “heteronormativity”) can be hugely damaging to single people, couples without children, those attracted to their own gender, divorced people, adopted children, people in unhappy relationships and those facing domestic abuse who are looking for a way out.

The idealised image can also be damaging to people who *are* in monogamous heterosexual marriages with children. This is because they are expected to conform to all manner of conventions that are at best cultural coincidences and at worst psychologically restrictive (for example, there are many people who feel awkward about having friends of the opposite sex without there being sexual or romantic interest involved). Couples can also come under huge pressure to appear “happy” at difficult times and such pressures can easily lead to a hypocritical sexuality. For example, pornography and prostitution have been defended as “saving” marriages by preventing break-ups.

Of course, when criticising the *idealising* of certain relationships it is important to be clear that we are not attacking those relationships themselves.

Understandings of sexual orientation

There are several common ways of understanding sexual orientation.

- *Heterosexual uniformity*
This is based on the assumption that everyone, or nearly everyone, is basically heterosexual and suited to monogamous relationships with children. Until recently, society operated on this assumption and many churches still do. People whose orientations don't fit into this pattern are seen as at best ill and at worst sinful.
- *Gay exemption*
This is perhaps the most common understanding of sexuality in British society today. People who take this approach accept that a minority of people are attracted to their own sex and believe that there is nothing unhealthy or unethical about this. Such an approach is becoming increasingly accepted within churches that welcome the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in loving, committed monogamous relationships. This is far more affirming for such people than the uniformity approach and demonstrates significant progress in society and churches in recent years. However, it also has its problems: gay and lesbian people can at times appear as a special group who are allowed to deviate from the norm as a sort of exceptional case. People whose orientation is bisexual or otherwise different to the norm do not easily fit into this model.
- *Bisexual spectrum*
There are many people in society, and some in the churches, who accept that sexual orientation is more complicated than splitting up human beings into "straight" and "gay". The Kinsey Scale suggests that we all have the capacity for bisexuality: some are exclusively heterosexual, others are exclusively gay, many fit somewhere on a spectrum in between. This model goes a long way towards appreciating the variety of human sexuality and avoiding the tendency to accept sexual minorities only as exemptions. However, those who use the spectrum can give the impression that sexuality is solely about which gender(s) a person finds attractive, ignoring other aspects of sexual attraction and fulfilment.
- *Sexual diversity*
This approach goes beyond the spectrum to emphasise that sexual orientation is too broad, wide, deep and messy to fit into neat categories. As long as such a model is not used to avoid difficult issues, it allows us to appreciate that sexual orientation is not solely about gender and that it is an issue of relevance to everyone. As the Christian writer Jo Ind puts it, sexuality is "whatever turns you on".

Whatever turns you on

Sexual orientation can cover all aspects of what someone finds sexually appealing and fulfilling. This can include such factors as:

- *Gender* – whether someone is attracted to men, to women, to both, or mostly to one but sometimes to the other

- *Physical appearance* – features that someone finds attractive, e.g. short, tall, dark hair, blonde hair, etc (it is interesting that this is usually seen as a trivial issue when compared to gender, but may make just as much difference to whether one person is attracted to another)
- *Psychological and emotional factors* – personality traits that a person finds appealing or offputting in another, either instinctively or in terms of their presence in a sexual relationship
- *Sexual practices* – for many people the focus of sexual activity is penetrative vaginal intercourse (“mainstream sex”), but for others this is only part of their sexual activity or not present at all; this applies to both same-sex and heterosexual couples
- *Styles of commitment* – some choose lifelong monogamous commitment, others may be more cautious about this, while there are some who enter other arrangements

Acknowledging the existence of the above dimensions is important even if there are some we do not feel comfortable with or certain practices to which we object. Sexual orientation raises complex ethical questions, but it is far better to tackle these questions prayerfully than to ignore them.

Orientation and a Christian understanding of values

As Christians, we are called to seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in all aspects of our lives. This means it is vital that we don't see our sexuality as unrelated to our faith.

It also means not replacing a reliance on God with a list of rules about what is and is not allowed. In a sense, lists of rules are an easy way out, a way of *not* seeking the constant guidance of God. Important values from a Jesus' perspective, based on love, can guide us as we seek God's leading.

Such a reliance on the Holy Spirit is a challenge both to legalism and to self-centred notions of “anything goes”. It is in some ways more difficult than both, but let us trust that is also more fulfilling.

SEX AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Truth or taboo

The subject of homosexuality touches deep emotions within the community of the church:

- Within those who know the pain of rejection and vilification from the very body with whom they are called to be one, because of their sexual orientation;
- Within those who believe that same-sex relationships are contrary to any interpretation of scripture and a major moral threat to church and society.

Recent decades have brought the debate in the church out into the open as never before because of the greater acceptance of homosexuality in society as a whole. However, positions have become largely polarised and only served to reveal how deeply divided the

church is on this matter¹. Not only is the subject itself subtly complex but discussion over it confronts us with other significant issues, such as the: -

- Nature of biblical revelation;
- Principles we use to interpret the biblical text;
- Understanding we have of sex and sexuality;
- Link between social taboo and our concept of sin;
- Expression of godliness and holiness in ethics ... and quite a few more.

Whatever final conclusions are reached on the subject the simple fact remains; the Christian church is, and historically has been, a deeply homophobic community. This reality has been the primary influence behind western society's long-standing negative and hostile stance towards both homosexuality and homosexuals. Until recently it has never shown any willingness to try to understand the real nature of same-sex orientation, and even now only a minority are really concerned to do so². This reality sets an important and distorting backdrop to all attempts at making progress in this matter.

This session, in trying to hear all sides on the subject, will suggest that a quite different approach needs to be taken. This is that the true biblical, and therefore Christian, focus must be found by starting with the issues of 'promiscuity' and 'perversion' rather than the more simplistic question and debate as to whether homosexuality is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable.

Positions and perceptions

Before working with the detail it is important to set out the three basic positions that Christians take over the subject of homosexuality; and briefly consider the perceptions that lie behind them. The issues will be explored in much more detail in the body of this session³. They are:

▪ Traditional

This sees homosexuals as deviant and sinful, their lifestyle and behaviour as the result of clear personal choice; or at the very least the result of circumstances and influences that they can make a decision to reject and walk away from. The result of this decision will be that they will no longer be homosexual, but healed and become a 'normal' heterosexual. The call is for them to 'repent' in the full biblical sense of the word. These conclusions are reached by a *straight* reading of the biblical text which is seen as clearly condemning any homosexual expression whatever as sin. Lesbians and gays are rejected by local churches holding this view, and will only be accepted as sinners repenting and changing.

¹ However, it must be said that there are many Christians who may take a traditional public stand on homosexuality who personally have many questions and doubts on the subject.

² Some organisations like the 'Evangelical Alliance', while still holding a traditional position have asked the lesbian and gay community to forgive the church for its hostile attitude in the past; of course only time will tell if it will make any practical difference.

³ They are set out in graphic form in the accompanying chart [Model 1] on page 64

▪ **Conditional**

This position in response to homosexuality takes a different stand to the 'traditional' view because the Christians who hold it have been influenced by their experience of meeting lesbian and gay Christians and hearing their story. They have come to see the 'traditional' stance as flawed in its basic assumption that all homosexuals have chosen to be as they are. They have discovered lesbians and gays who not only have a deep and significant Christian experience, but who also make it quite clear that they have never ever had any feelings attracting them to the opposite sex. Christians holding the 'conditional' view recognise that homosexuality is a genuinely different sexual orientation. Nevertheless, they are still confronted with the biblical texts that seem to clearly condemn any same-sex sexual activity. While they are persuaded that the 'Traditional' position is no longer tenable and accepts that the church must welcome lesbians and gays as members of the body; they must also take the statements of the biblical text seriously. Their conclusion is that lesbian and gay Christians should be part of the church but remain celibate. This is a significant step away from the 'traditional' position. It has certainly given some lesbians and gays more room to move within certain Christian communities and has created a much easier environment within which to keep the debate going.

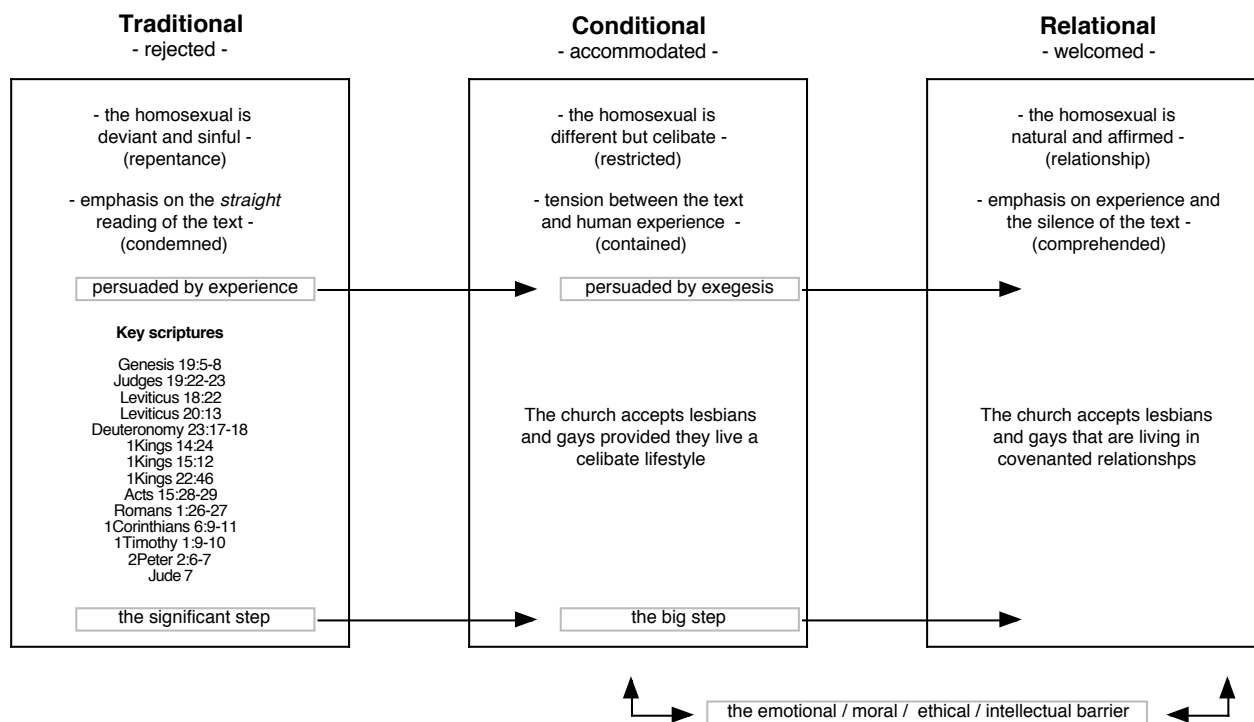
▪ **Relational**

This position is similar to the 'conditional' one in that it recognises that to be homosexual is to have a genuinely different sexual orientation, but it is distinct in that it is persuaded that the biblical texts need to be approached and understood in an alternative way to that in which they have usually been interpreted. As we will discuss below, it argues that the biblical text is not speaking about homosexuality as it is understood it today, but is actually addressing other issues and is therefore effectively silent on this specific issue. This being so, the 'relational' position believes that the Christian church should accept covenanted same-sex relationships in the same way as it accepts heterosexual relationships. To make such a response is a big step for many, given the historical influence of the 'traditional' position, and it is wholly dependent upon being convinced about the alternative way of looking at the biblical text. However, even for those who have been persuaded by the exegesis, there remains a strong emotional barrier to be crossed connected to the ethical question as to whether same-sex unions can ever in fact truly be moral. The power of these theological / intellectual, moral / ethical and emotional barriers are very strong indeed, which we shall address again in our conclusion. So the debate continues.

We recognise that presenting people, as simply being in one of these three positions does not do justice to the subtleties of many people's thinking and emotions about the subject. The sense of 'still working things out' that many express is important to recognise. It is hoped, however, that the approach that has been taken can at least form an aid to thinking around the subject more clearly and help in assessing our individual responses to it.

MODEL [1] CHRISTIAN PERCEPTIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Three positions held in relation to the biblical text and human experience



Important considerations

Anthropology, sociology and biology all show clearly that same sex activity is to be found in every culture, among all social classes and even in animal behaviour. Its persistent presence means that it must seriously addressed, not least if as Christians we are to come to truthful conclusions. In doing this there are some important factors to be considered.

▪ Facts and figures

Statistics regarding homosexuality are very hard to come by. It is, however, estimated that possibly as many as 5% of the total population of British men and women have a homosexual orientation; the number of practising homosexuals is possibly lower. According to FE Kenyon of the BMA it has been suggested that as many as 1: 25 of men and 1: 4 of women are either latent or active homosexuals⁴. This would suggest that in a church congregation of 200 you would *expect* to have nine or ten people with a homosexual orientation. While these figures are extremely tentative they illustrate once again that this is a matter of great importance for Christian understanding and response.

▪ Historical influences

There are some very important cultural and historical factors that need to be considered in Christian thinking about homosexuality. They will simply be highlighted here and some will be returned to for further consideration later in the session: -

⁴ This is quoted in David Field 'The Homosexual Way - A Christian Option? Grove Books 1980 p3.

- **Canaanite culture:** we know that promiscuous same-sex activity was an accepted part of the fertility worship of ancient Canaanite religion (cf 1Kg 14:24; 15:12; 22:46). This was not specifically bisexual or homosexual but deliberately deviant heterosexual behaviour that was part of the spiritual repertoire of pagan religion to keep the sexual rhythms of nature flowing. This is one of the backgrounds against which the references to homosexuality in the Hebrew Scriptures need to be read - they are part of their passionate attack on idolatry and its corrupting influence.
- **Classical culture:** male homoerotic activity was widespread in the world of ancient Greece and Rome; those involved were mostly heterosexual. While it was part of accepted promiscuous behaviour, it was at its core to do with 'power'. The classical world saw a distinction between 'men' and 'non-men' [women, youths, slaves, 'effeminate' males, eunuchs, barbarians, defeated enemy soldiers etc]. The 'non-men' were available for sex at the will of the 'men', but it was a matter of pride and power that the 'men' were never sexually penetrated⁵. This is an important background against which the New Testament references to homosexuality need to be read - they are part of their challenge of promiscuity and perversion.
- **Christian culture:** western Christendom developed very strict and complex rules about accepted and unacceptable sexual behaviour, tied up with the church's teaching on sin. Sexual activity without the possibility of conceiving a child was forbidden [thus, raping a nun could be considered less sinful than masturbation because it was seen as more 'natural']. Same-sex activity was also seen as a threat to the very fabric of society because it challenged the male dominated power structures. These controlled social and family activity, marriage and inheritance and could not cope with the challenge of open same-sex male relationships. For these reasons the church supported the law passed in England in 1290 which requiring a convicted 'sodomite' to be buried alive; [even repentant homosexuals were often executed as an act of mercy / grace so they could not sin again]. While the mode of execution was to change the death penalty remained in place until 1861. Until 1967 a homosexual man could have faced life imprisonment for same-sex activity. Since that date consenting males, over 21 years old, may practise homosexual acts in private. The debate continues as to whether the age of consent should be 18 or 16 years of age⁶. Curiously, the law has always ignored lesbianism.

▪ **Queer language**

The words we use to describe something often give us significant insight into the popular history of how they were understood. It is interesting that the Swiss physician Karoly Benkert only coined the term 'homosexual' in 1869, the word 'heterosexual' was only coined in response in 18909. The two widely used terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' came from:

- **Gay:** from a 12th century French word for a homosexual;
- **Lesbian:** from the 6th century BC Greek island of Lesbos, a place of female intimacy.

⁵ For a detailed discussion and the source literature see SD Moore 'Que(e)rying Paul' in 'Auguries' Ed D Clines & S Moore pub Sheffield Academic Press 1998.

⁶ See Moore p258



The abusive title 'faggot' was used about homosexuals because of the practice of burning them at the stake.

The two terms used in English law to classify male homosexual activity are:

- **'Buggery'**: it is a corruption of the ancient Bulgarian word 'bogomil' ('friend of God'); used as a mediaeval term of abuse referring to Bulgarian men who travelled in pairs as heretical preachers, wandering western Europe challenging the church. It was based on what people claimed they got up to in secret.
- **'Sodomy'**: taken from the phrase 'Sodom and Gomorrah', and refers to the mistaken belief that the main reason why these cities were destroyed by God was because of homosexual practice (this will be discussed in detail below).

Sadly both these terms are born out of insults and each find their origin with the church.

▪ **Homophobia**

The reasons for homophobia are complex; an irrational and emotional revulsion which has nothing to do with either logic or morality but is rooted in ignorance. Whatever opinion a Christian may hold about homosexuality they must, by the very nature of the gospel, renounce 'homophobia'. Tragically, however, the Church has historically been one of its major agents.

Popular examples of ideas that lie behind homophobia:

Gay men are perceived to be a threat because:

- They are a danger to young children
- They are a danger to marriage and family life

These are total misconceptions:

- It is true that some individual homosexuals have occasionally been convicted of sexual offences against children, but most paedophiles are heterosexuals; proportionate to their total numbers it is quite unjust to suggest homosexuals as a group put young people at moral, emotional and physical risk;
- It is true that some radical groups like the Gay Liberation Front have as a stated aim the abolition of the family, but they are a very small minority of homosexuals; the growing number of homosexual marriages reveals that many gays and lesbians desire the benefits of a close family life-style.

The intimacies of homosexual physical acts are seen as disgusting, for example:

- Mutual masturbation
- Oral sex
- Anal intercourse

This is open to debate:

- In terms of global culture proportionately more heterosexuals than by homosexuals practise these sexual acts⁷. If a sexual act is done with the mutual consent of both covenanted partners, and it increases the love and respect that they have for each other, is it in itself to be declared as wrong? The fact that a particular person, or couple, might find a certain act distasteful does not in itself mean that it is wrong for all others. If this is so, then homosexuals may never be condemned simply on the basis of how they express their sexual intimacy.

▪ **Origins**

What cannot be disputed is that some people simply *are* homosexual in their orientation. Why this is so is a matter of some debate. The fact is we have no answers; probably because in every case they are complex and in each case somewhat different. It is worth reflecting that those most interested in establishing the origins or causes of homosexuality are those wanting to 'cure' or 'heal' them, or those trying to establish the morality, or immorality, of homoerotic relationships. Homosexuals themselves usually just try to get on with their lives as best they can, finding the questions theoretical. The main areas thought to be of possible influence in the emergence of same-sex orientation are:

- **Genetics:** this touches the key question, "Is homosexuality innate or developed; are you born a homosexual or do you become one?" In 1991 Dr Simon LeVay of the Salk Institute identified differences in the hypothalamus [which regulates sex] and adjacent brain structures in some homosexual men from those of heterosexual men⁸. In 1993 and 1995 Dr Dean Hammer of the National Cancer Institute argued there was a gene which predisposed some males to become homosexual; but this research has not been able to be replicated⁹. The Genome Project's discovery of fewer human genes than originally thought has led to doubts that there can be a genetic source to homosexuality, but the fact that we do not understand much of the possible interaction between genes still leaves it an open question.
- **Psychology:** it used to be widely believed that homosexuality was a psychological illness and many cruelties were carried out in an attempt to 'cure the condition'. In 1974 the American Psychiatric Association said that it did not meet the criteria for a disorder and no longer considered it as such; medical groups in many other nations have taken a similar response.
- **Family:** some very early postnatal and neonatal influences may be quite significant in terms of sexual orientation. Some people take the view that a lack of parental bonding in early childhood, especially with the parent of the same sex, may be a factor in developing sexual orientation. However, it simply isn't true that 'hostile fathers make gay sons'; children from well-integrated families are homosexual. Sexual violence and abusive relationships may sometimes influence orientation.
- **Society:** adolescence is always a vulnerable time in the process of sexual development and orientation. Most negotiate it relatively unscathed, while others realise

⁷ Some missionaries insisted upon the legendary 'missionary position' for sexual intercourse in an attempt to make it more difficult for anal intercourse to take place between heterosexual couples.

⁸ See for a full discussion D Gelman [et al] 'Born or Bred?' Newsweek 24th February 1992.

⁹ See 'Homosexuality and the Bible: Another Look' pub Cumberland Centre 1999.

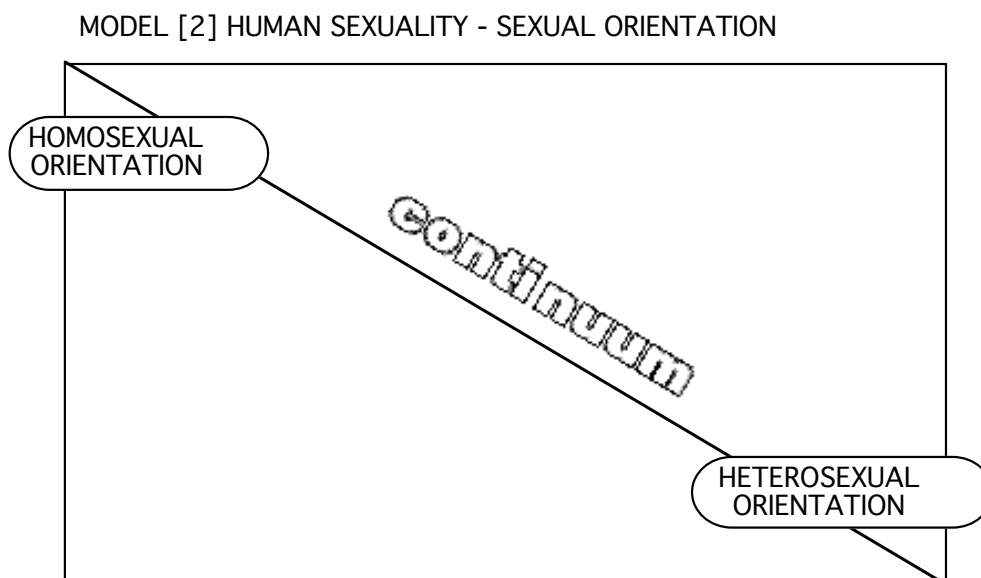
they are different from the majority while not really understanding what this means. Same-sex by-play can sometimes prove easier for others than forming heterosexual relationships; these experiences may mark the beginning of a life-long incapacity to form healthy sexual relationships. Some may also experience homosexual advances from others. Same-sex environments [eg schools or armed forces] can be very hostile to homosexuals and also nurture disturbed and deviant sexual behaviour in others.

- **Choice:** this has been a primary argument by different groups:
 - Traditional Christian approaches to counselling / healing argue that, whatever the influences and factors, the gays or lesbians have made a choice about their sexuality and that an act of repentance must be the first step to reorientation¹⁰
 - Some gays and lesbians argue that sexual orientation is a matter of personal choice and preference alone, an individual decision everyone must make; the choice of heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality is of no moral consequence provided one is sympathetic towards those who have chosen differently.
 - Some feminists become lesbian as a political statement; demonstrating another way of loving that can bring happiness and fulfilment, it is also a way of challenging our patriarchal society and a woman's place in it¹¹

Sex and orientation

It is very easy for discussion about homosexuality to become simplistic when in fact the whole subject of human sexuality is both complex and sensitive. Exploring a subject like this requires the ground rules of respect for and sensitivity to the views and experiences of others and that the the thinking and discussion takes place in a safe place.

We must begin by recognising that every human being is broken, within a broken and fallen world. This inevitably includes our sexuality and sexual orientation. It is probably impossible to speak of anyone being *totally* heterosexual or homosexual; we all find ourselves somewhere along a continuum between the two extremes.



¹⁰ See A Comiskey 'Pursuing Sexual Wholeness', Monarch 1991.

¹¹ See Celia Kitzinger 'Loving Women' in 'Woman's Experience of Sex' by S Kitzinger, Penguin 1985 p98-109.

It is important to recognise that there are differences between 'sex' and 'sexuality': -

- **Sex** - the physical and biological differences between men and women;
- **Sexuality** - the cultural and behavioural practices that define male and female.

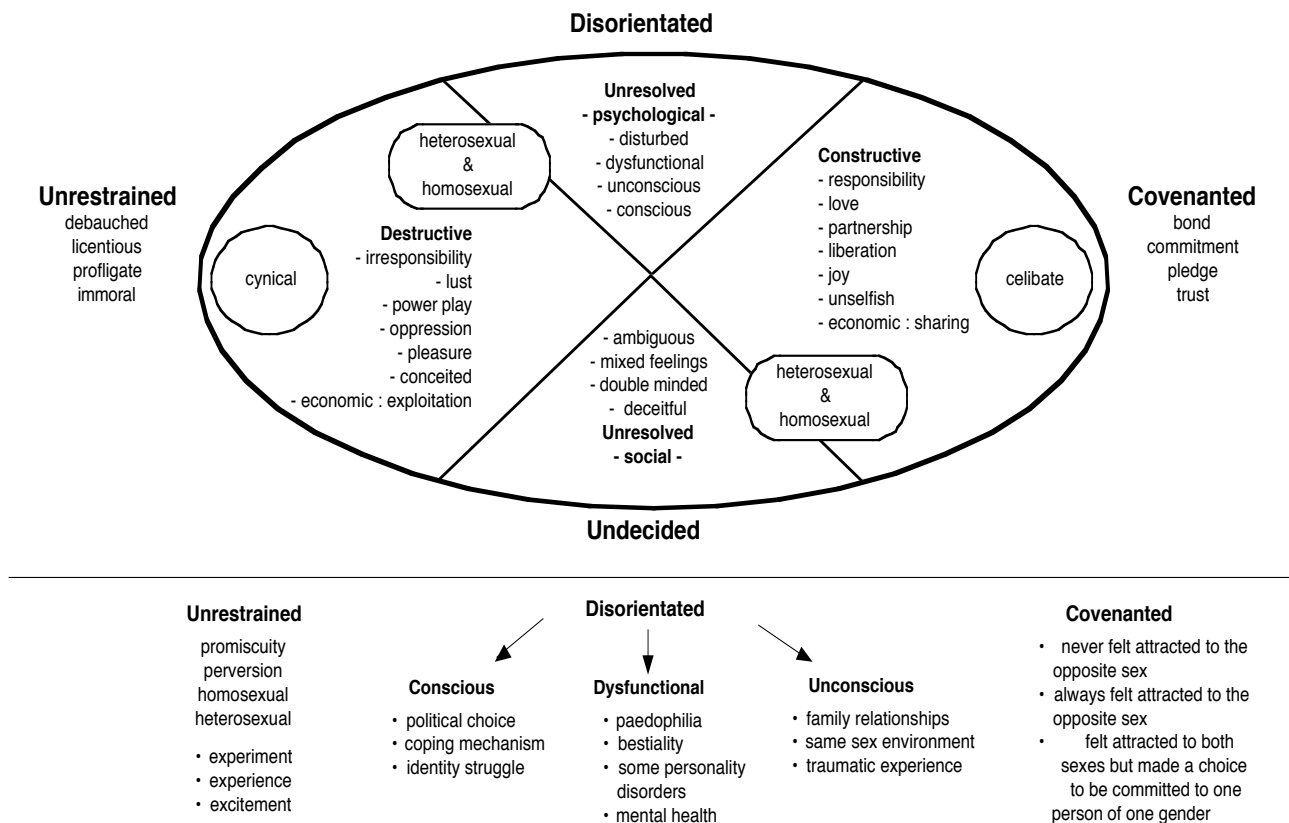
What influences characterise our own personal sexual orientation cannot be fully determined [as we have discussed above], but these are likely to be a range of genetic and family influences shaped by social and cultural experiences. There seems to be reason to believe that some people can undergo changes in sexual orientation as they learn to know themselves along the life-path from infancy, through adolescence to adulthood, and during life stages throughout the years of maturity. Research would suggest that the majority of people experience mixed senses of orientation [but does not exhibit mixed behaviour]. This can lead to deep subtle tensions in terms of identity; how people deal with this will affect their behaviour, as we shall now see.

Sex and behaviour

In an attempt to try identify the complex issues surrounding human sexuality and behaviour, and to reflect upon the homosexual experience in the light of them, we are presenting a diagram that should be viewed alongside the text.

MODEL [3] HUMAN SEXUALITY - SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

The continuum of sexuality and behaviour



Imagine that you are standing at the centre of a circle that represents human sexual behaviour; this is dependent on the interaction of four patterns of activity and attitude. The four segments of the circle illustrate these. The question is where does any person, or each person, stand within the circle?

▪ **Undecided: unresolved social factors**

Every human being faces a simple choice about their sexual behaviour; they can decide to live in a committed relationship with one other person, or they can elect to be promiscuous in their sexual activity with a range of sexual experiences and encounters. Many people remain effectively undecided over their sexual behaviour. Because the pressures of society and culture to conform to the accepted patterns of marriage and sexual relationship are very strong they usually conform, while at the same time the desire to be sexually unrestrained and unfaithful is a constant urge. They will usually indulge their passions whenever they think they can get away with it. This may be in physical encounters but it may be in feeding their fantasies. The reality is that their sexual behaviour is unresolved; they live in the twilight between the two worlds of covenant and unrestraint¹². They are double minded: ambiguous, ambivalent and deceitful. The person is making a clear choice to behave like this; it is not a psychological issue. This can be as true for lesbians and gays as it is for heterosexuals.

▪ **Covenanted: constructive choices**

There are those who resolve the choice about sexual behaviour by embracing a covenanted relationship with another, established by the bond of commitment and the pledge of trust. This is a constructive experience of responsibility, love, partnership, liberation and joy. It is not self-seeking. It is unselfish and involves the sharing of everything including the economic basis of life. This covenanted pattern of influence includes those who have chosen or taken on a celibate way of life; either because they have not (yet) found a life partner or because they delight in the freedom that this experience of expressing their sexuality gives them. For the Christian this covenanted sphere is clearly the God-given dimension of expressing sexual behaviour. Here the psychological issues around sexuality are resolved. For many, as we shall discuss below, this is understood to be as true for lesbians and gays as it is for heterosexuals.

▪ **Unrestrained: destructive choices**

There are those who resolve the choice about sexual behaviour by quite openly embracing an unrestrained sexual lifestyle; involving a self-abandoned and reckless expression of their sexuality. This behaviour has no commitment to others but is centred on pleasure seeking with no sense of responsibility. Again the person has made an informed choice to behave like this; it is not a psychological issue. They are consciously accepting any self-damage that may result. In the long term this choice is as destructive as the covenanted choice is constructive. It is fundamentally irresponsible; energised by lust and power play. It is essentially oppressive, self-seeking and conceited. Economically it can be highly exploitative. In its extreme form it is openly cynical in the way it exploits others; for example through prostitution and pornography. Once again, this can be as true for lesbians and gays as for heterosexuals.

¹² There are of course strong social and economic reasons to explain the phenomenon of polygamy, but it is also interesting to reflect upon it in the light of sexual indecision.

▪ **Disoriented: unresolved psychological factors**

There are of course those people whose sexual behaviour is shaped by unresolved psychological struggles and issues. This is by far the most difficult area of sexual behaviour to comment upon; the deepest, most subtle and most complex. It is here that not only the person experiences the greatest pain and struggle, themselves but often by those whose lives are impacted by them. We reflect on this disoriented sexual activity in terms of three distinct sub-sets:

- **Conscious:** this is where the person is working to resolve issues that express themselves in a psychological and / or emotional way. They are not trying to avoid them, they are trying to find wholeness and simply develop coping strategies to keep going. In terms of homosexuality it might be a heterosexual woman who decides to embrace a lesbian lifestyle because she feels her destructive relationships with men have become irreparable, or because she wants to make a political statement as a feminist challenging patriarchy.
- **Unconscious:** this is where the person is not working through psychological issues [they may have limited awareness of their needs]. His or her behaviour may be marked by unhelpful coping strategies such as denying there is a problem, manipulating reactions or simply being passive; the individual may also avoid facing up to orientation issues. This will compound the persons stress and sense of fragmentation. It may also lead the person to play 'behaviour games' to try and resolve matters deep within themselves.
- **Dysfunctional:** this is where the person's sexual identity and orientation has been deeply damaged. This is often abuse related and the result of family and life experience. This can lead to a person's sexuality being expressed in a non-legitimate way such as paedophilia or even bestiality.

As we have stressed all these patterns of sexual behaviour can be the experience of the heterosexual and the homosexual alike. This view helps to clear up some of the misunderstandings attached to all sexual behaviour, removes some of the prejudices and helps to explain some of the difficulties both heterosexuals and homosexuals sometimes face.

Scripture and homosexuality

For many Christians the issue of homosexuality turns on how the biblical text is understood and interpreted. This is the subject to which we must now turn. Scripture actually says very little on the subject of same-sex relationships, there are in fact fourteen possible references with any possible connection to the subject in the whole Bible:

- Genesis 19:5-8
- Judges 19:22-23
- Leviticus 18:22
- Leviticus 20:13
- Deuteronomy 23:17-18
- 1Kings 14:24
- 1Kings 15:12
- 1Kings 22:46
- Acts 15:28-29
- Romans 1:26-27

- 1Corinthians 6:9-11
- 1Timothy 1:9-10
- 2Peter 2:6-7
- Jude 7

It is of course how these texts are read and interpreted that is the key to whether one would hold a 'traditional', 'conditional' or a 'relational' position. As we shall see there are quite different approaches and conclusions to be considered and we need to weigh them carefully in the light of both the biblical text and human experience. It is a serious test for hermeneutics. A number of the texts can be grouped together around a common theme. This is the way we will approach them now.

▪ **Sodom and Gibeah**

In Genesis 19 and Judges 19 there are two disturbing stories that make a reference to homosexuality and have historically set the stage for thinking and responding to the subject for generations. There are also two references in the New Testament [2 Peter 2:6-7; Jude 7] that refer back to the Genesis passage. We shall look at each in turn and then comment on them:

- **Genesis** tells the story of how Lot offers hospitality to two divine messengers at his home in Sodom, the men of the city surround the house and demand the surrender of the guests:

“Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we might know them.” Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold I have two daughters who are virgins; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof” (Gen 19:5-8).

But for the intervention of the visitors, who struck the attackers with blindness, the men of Sodom might have succeeded in their aims. Miraculously Lot and his daughters escape the destruction of the city that follows.

- **Judges** tells the story of how a Levite and his concubine, travelling through the country, are given hospitality by an old man in Gibeah. The men of the city surround the house and demand the surrender of the male guest:

“Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him.” And the man, the master of the house went out to them and said to them, “No, my brethren, do not act so wickedly; seeing that this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing” (Jg 19:22-23).

The old man’s concubine is substituted for the male guest and is gang-raped throughout the night and found as a lifeless wreck in the morning. Judgment follows in the form of combined military action against the tribe by the Israelite forces.

- **2 Peter** refers back to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah:

“... if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes (God) condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly; and he

rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked [for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds], then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the lust of defiling passion and despise authority” (2Pt 2: 6-10).

- **Jude** also refers to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah:

“... just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

The traditional and popular view has always been that both the Sodom and Gibeah stories were examples of God’s judgment on human wickedness especially shown by the inhabitants of both towns’ lust for homosexual satisfaction. The New Testament phrases like, ‘the lust of defiling passion’ (2 Pet 2) and ‘unnatural lust’ (Jude 7) have been said only to confirm this conclusion.

It is now recognised, even by many who hold a traditional position over homosexuality, that the stories from Sodom and Gibeah are concerned with social breakdown and extreme sexual violence. They are the sort of events that would shock and outrage anyone, whatever their sexual orientation. They have absolutely nothing to do with homosexuality as an issue of orientation as we are discussing it. The texts are therefore of no help in discerning biblical perspectives on gay and lesbian relationships:

- In both stories the fundamental wickedness was hostility and violence to vulnerable strangers who had a moral responsibility to offer protection and hospitality as all the ancient laws of the east demanded;
- On this foundation of failure the deep corruption of the society is revealed; the ‘sin of Sodom’ is spoken of in many ways in the Bible:
 - Idolatry (Dt 29:22-26)
 - Injustice (Is 1:10-17)
 - Grinding the face of the poor (Is 3:9-15)
 - Adultery and lying (Jr 23:14)
 - Gluttony and pride (Ez 16:48)
 - Unpreparedness (Lk 17:28-30)
 - Ungodliness, defiling passion, despising authority (2Pt 2:6-7)
- The destruction of Sodom is the most frequently mentioned Genesis event in the whole of the Hebrew scriptures and stands as a symbol of everything that stands in contrast to covenant with Yahweh; every sin, and no specific sin, is the ‘sin of Sodom’ - calling homosexuality ‘sodomy’ has no foundation or justification whatever;
- The participants in both the sexual attacks were clearly heterosexual, in that they were offered Lot’s daughters (Genesis) and ravaged the concubine (Judges);
- The reference to ‘unnatural lust’ (‘strange flesh’ in the KJV) in Jude 7 is almost certainly a reference to the attempted intercourse with angels not humans - note the



word 'likewise' and see verse 6 which refers to Gen 6:1-4 where the angels intercourse with the 'daughters of men' brings God's judgment¹³; this again has nothing whatever to do with homosexuality.

While these stories offer no help in a biblical discussion about sexual orientation they do show very powerfully the challenge of scripture against every sort of promiscuity, perversion and human injustice.

▪ **Covenant and cult prostitutes**

Deuteronomy and 1 Kings makes reference in particular to male prostitutes found in Judah as a consequence of idolatry and pagan influence and states that their removal from the land is a sign of spiritual reformation: -

- **Deuteronomy** forbids cult prostitution as a Canaanite abomination:

'There shall be no cult prostitutes of the daughters (or) of the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog, into the house of the Lord your God...' (Dt 23:17-18)

- **Rehoboam** failed to remove male cult prostitutes from Judah:

'There were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord drove out before all the people of Israel' (1Kg 14:24)

- **Asa** purged Judah of male cult prostitutes:

'He put away the male cult prostitutes out of the land and removed all the idols that his father had made' (1Kg 15:12)

- **Jehoshaphat** removed all remaining male cult prostitutes from Judah:

'And the remnant of the male cult prostitutes who remained in the days of his father Asa, he exterminated from the land' (1Kg 22:46)

As mentioned earlier we know that promiscuous same-sex activity was an accepted part of the fertility worship of ancient Canaanite religion. What is being challenged here is corruption, paganism and idolatry. What is condemned here is corrupted sexual behaviour; whether heterosexual or homosexual. It is certainly not a simple and clear-cut condemnation of homosexuality. It is not actually stated that the male cult prostitutes engaged solely in homoerotic acts; they were almost certainly also available for women to sleep with. The purpose of the passages needs to be seen in their religious context, to curb pagan practices, in the same way that marriage to foreign wives was forbidden. The reference to 'a dog' in Deuteronomy may be a term of general contempt or a reference to the position adopted in intercourse. If these observations are correct then these passages

¹³ See R Bauckham '*Jude, 2Peter*' - *Word Biblical Commentary 50*' Word Books 1983 p54



have nothing to say about the question of someone who is homosexual in their natural orientation.

▪ **Leviticus and prohibition**

Leviticus presents us with two of the clearest statements in the Bible apparently forbidding all homosexual acts completely. The references in Genesis, Deuteronomy, Judges and Kings give no help in trying to resolve the real questions lesbian and gay Christians have about their sexuality and activity; here the statements seem quite clear:

- **Chapter 18:19-23** - sexual behaviour avoiding Canaanite customs: -

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (v 2)

- **Chapter 20:10-16** - offences subject to capital punishment

“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them” (v 13)

There is no question that these seemingly unambiguous condemnations of same-sex male behaviour are the basis of its subsequent universal rejection within mainstream Judaism.

In the contrasting Christian approaches to homosexuality the:

Traditional / Conditional: see these texts as foundational prohibitions that the New Testament teaching builds upon:

- Homosexual acts are identified (18:19-23) with everything that is opposed to covenant and relationship with God;
- Homosexual acts are listed (20:10-16) along with adultery, incest and bestiality which are still unacceptable as Christian sexual behaviour today;
- The word ‘abomination’ and the severe penalties attached emphasise the spiritual and social seriousness of this behaviour;
- It is the *act* of homosexuality that is forbidden, ‘lying with a man’ (Heb *‘mishkav zakur’*), the *motive* is not seen as morally significant;
- While it is recognised that you cannot simply carry the Hebrew laws over into the new covenant experience, and many are made obsolete in Jesus, there is no distinction between ritual and moral law and the church has to discern which have continuing validity - however, homosexuality seem inextricably linked to instructions about adultery, incest, bestiality, child sacrifice etc which continue to be seen as having validity.

Relational: sees these texts as simply not addressing the issue of genuine homosexual orientation:

- They are challenging Canaanite pagan, and probably heterosexual, perverted activity which was clearly wrong - the word ‘abomination’ makes this point;
- The burden of the text is to draw a clear line between Israel who was in a covenant with Yahweh with a high moral character and the perversions of the pagan world around them which were deeply corrupting;

- There is no word in Hebrew for 'homosexual' as we understand it, as a genuine and integral part of some people's sexual orientation, this is why the texts can only speak of what is obviously a physical activity on the part of a perverted heterosexual;
- The historical, social, cultural and social circumstances were such that the biblical texts were not able to see beyond the many examples of rampant sexual perversion to people with a genuine different sexual orientation - many of whom, we have to recognise, would probably have been actively involved in pagan practices as well;
- These texts are concerned about deviant sexual behaviour outside divine and relational covenant; they are simply silent about our questions and struggles over homosexual experience and relationships within covenant.

▪ 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Acts

The New Testament, like the Hebrew scriptures, has few references to homosexuality. Jesus makes no reference to the subject. The only comment comes from four passages [Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy] that deal with the Gentile world; we shall look at three of them here and then consider the Romans passage separately: -

1Corinthians finds Paul seemingly exasperated with attitudes towards moral behaviour in the church clearly outlining the kind of wrongdoing that places people outside the kingdom of God:

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor ‘sensualists’ (Gk *malakoi*), nor ‘homosexuals’ (Gk *arsenkoitai*), nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom” (6:9-11)

- It is debated what the Greek word *malakoi* means here; it has the meaning of ‘soft’ and in some ancient literature has the sense of a passive partner [often a young boy] in same-sex activity, but could simply mean ‘given to self-indulgent pleasure’ without any homoerotic sense;
- It appears that this is the earliest occasion the word *arsenkoitai* appears in any Greek text 18; it seems to be a translation of the Hebrew phrase *mishkav zakur* (‘lying with a male’) we encountered earlier in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13;
- It is therefore popularly argued that *malakoi* and *arsenkoitai* and referring to the ‘passive’ and ‘active’ agents in homoerotic sex, but this may not be the case;
- The Traditional / Conditional position finds support in the apparent simple condemnation of homosexual activity, reinforced by the possible link with the Levitical texts;
- The fact that, like Hebrew, there is no word in Greek with the understanding of ‘homosexual in orientation’, but only language to describe same-sex activity, supports the Relational view that it is sexual (probably heterosexual) perversion that is again being addressed here and therefore not relating to the questions contemporary lesbian and gay Christians are struggling with.

1Timothy speaks about the lawless and disobedient who stand condemned before God, those who are homosexual are among their number:

“... the law is not laid down for the just but the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of

fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, 'homosexuals' [Gk *arsenokoitai*], kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine ..." (1:9-10)

- The vice list is wide ranging, based on themes in the Hebrew scriptures and has little to offer in discussion about sexual ethics; for the Traditional / Conditional position it confirms the continuing forbidding of same-sex activity, to the Relational position it is speaking about a godlessness that has nothing to do with disciples of Jesus who are lesbian or gay.

Acts gives an apostolic decree as minimal moral direction to Gentile converts so that they can have fellowship with the predominantly Jewish members of the church:

"For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials; that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from *porneia* (fornication)" (Acts 15:28-29)

- It is argued that these instructions are based on Levitical purity regulations and that the word *pornea* includes all sexual prohibitions found in Lev 18:19-23 including same-sex intercourse; however, it is not universally agreed that this is the correct understanding of *pornea* in this passage.

These scriptures will be given different weight and interpretations by different people, but they must be part of all discussions and final conclusions.

▪ **Romans**

The words of Paul in 1:18-32 are the key text for Christian ethics on the subject of homosexuality because it is the only New Testament passage that discusses it within a theological context. The text is interesting in being the only place in scripture where female as well as male same-sex relationships appear to be condemned.

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator ... For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Rm 1:24-27)

Many people have written much about these words we will briefly summarise the ideas of two scholars:

Richard Hayes argues:¹⁴

- The passage follows Paul's declaration of the nature of the gospel, righteousness through faith (v 1-17), he then sets this against a picture of fallen unrighteous humanity,

¹⁴ The broad approach to the passage follows R Hays 'The Moral Vision of the New Testament' T&T Clark 1997 p 383-389 who takes a Traditional / Conditional approach, to which the Relational comments differ.

a statement of the human condition illustrated by the worshiping of the creature rather than the Creator;

- Reference to homosexual behaviour is simply one illustration of the way humanity has 'exchanged the truth about God for a lie' and brought about total disorder in the human condition - homosexuality is sinful but no more sinful than any other manifestation of human rebellion;
- It is argued by some that the word 'exchanged' which reoccurs throughout the passage is not referring to a heterosexual choosing a homosexual lifestyle; it is not individual life decisions but more fundamentally the nature of the fallen condition of the world;
- The Traditional / Conditional conclusion that is drawn is that, this being so, *all* homosexual activity without exception is evidence of human alienation from God and is therefore completely unacceptable;
- The Relational response (which opposes Hayes approach) would be that just because the ancient biblical world had no concept of 'homosexual orientation' and were socially and culturally unable to identify it, does not mean that it is not valid and stands separate from the discussion rooted in rebellion against God.

James Alison¹⁵ says, "It is my view that Romans 1 has quite simply nothing at all to do with what we call homosexuality."

- This letter was almost certainly written in Corinth to Christians in Rome where there appear to have been two groups, one of Jewish believers another of Gentile believers, each thinking themselves superior to the other group. We begin by reading Romans 2:1

"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things"

The word "Therefore ..." indicates that these words are a conclusion to the arguments that went before.

- In the first chapter there is a standard Jewish polemic against pagans and the consequences of idolatry.¹⁶

"They 'travesty' (exchanged) the glory of God for images.'

- We know that ancient cities were full of temples and shrines with images of gods, goddesses, Cats, Jackals, Crocodiles, Serpents, Isis, Osiris, Anubis, Mithras and so on. Like the Jewish writings in 'The Book of Wisdom', idolatry is seen as the source of all evil. This is *because* pagan people became involved in the idolatrous cults and *then* they were led to get involved in passions, which did them no honour.
- A significant amount of cross-dressing, with orgiastic frenzies and allowing themselves to be penetrated by men; some going into frenzies and castrating themselves in devotion to their god and so become their eunuch. Women dressing up as satyrs with a

¹⁵ See <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng15.html> where his full argument is presented

¹⁶ Similar to the Jewish texts of 'The Book of Wisdom' or 'The Wisdom of Solomon'

prosthetic phallus so that they could be the penetrators rather than the penetratees with their partners (another 'travesty'). This would explain verse 26:¹⁷

'For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural...'

- The purpose of the passage is to prepare the ground for challenging the 'judging' and 'superiority' attitudes in the church at Rome. He draws on side the Jewish Christians by illustrating the foolishness ('wickedness') of the pagans who not only get involved in stupid travesties but also:

'Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander ...'

- Then comes the punch. Notice the change from 'they' to 'you':

'Therefore, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgement on another you judge yourself, because you the judge do the very same things ...'

So the Christians in Rome in their judgemental superiority behaviour are no better than the foolish pagans with their idols and erotic behaviour!

- The text is not about homosexuality or lesbianism, but inner attitudes of the heart that create shameless and stupid behaviour whether in the church or wider society. The references to the sexual behaviour are about promiscuous, pagan perversions and nothing to do with those seeking to be true to their homosexual orientation.

Having discussed the biblical texts we must now conclude by drawing together some final observations.

Responding to homosexuality

We have discussed the complex nature of human sexual behaviour and the shared experience of lesbians, gays and heterosexuals within it. Open questions still remain about the origins of homosexuality, while the personal experience continues to be deeply disturbing for many. We have seen that there are few biblical texts that make any reference to the subject of homoerotic relationships, and the few that appear to actually offer very little real help as we grapple with a Christian response to this issue. The church, with its shamefully homophobic history, continues to stand deeply divided on this subject. Let us examine the respective positions as we try to come to a personal decision based on the truth. The arguments of those holding a 'Traditional / Conditional' position are in straight text, those making a 'Relational' response are in italics:

¹⁷ Augustine and Clement of Alexandria interpreted these words straightforwardly as meaning women having anal intercourse with members of the other sex, nothing whatever to do with the lesbian experience. John Chrysostom at the end of the fourth century was in fact the first Church Father of whom we have record to read the passage as having anything to do with lesbianism

- Scripture presents a sustained witness to the fact that all homosexual activity is by its very nature sinful - there can be no exceptions and no compromise

The biblical text addresses promiscuity, perversion and idolatry (heterosexual and homosexual), it has no understanding of homosexual orientation; it is simply not addressing the issue

- For nearly two thousand years the church never sanctioned lesbian and gay sex, thus reinforcing the uncompromising position of scripture - we may not challenge that tradition without having irrefutable evidence to the contrary

The church has been held by the same social and cultural limitations as scripture, reinforced by false notions of sex and male dominated patterns of control - it was wrong over slavery and women and is wrong over covenanted homosexual relationships

- Accepting homosexuals into the church is not similar to the accepting of Gentiles into the Hebrew Christian congregations (cf Acts 10); they did it, finding in it a fulfilment of scripture that is not true for lesbians and gays

Hermeneutics calls Christians to dialogue with the biblical text in the light of life experience to discover truth:

- Hebrew wisdom challenged the tradition that only the sinful suffer
- Gentile Christians challenged the idea that believers had to become Jews
- Covenanted homosexuals challenge the notion that their unions are sinful

- It is untrue that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable, the nature of sin is that it is not freely chosen, we are in bondage to it but still morally responsible for our actions - therefore homosexual orientation is not morally neutral simply because it has not been chosen

The influence of sin is greater than the sum of our actions, all sexuality is expressed through brokenness caused by sin, - we have sinned like Adam sinned not because Adam sinned (cf Rm 5); homosexual orientation is how a person is and thus to express same-sex truthfully cannot be sin

- The fact that biblical language is about homoerotic activity, not orientation, demonstrates that actions not motives are what are really relevant

Actions illustrate character and must always be seen in context - the biblical context is always rebellion against God; the texts reveal no awareness of 'sexual orientation' or that there can be covenanted relationships which are rooted in God but also homosexual

- Homosexuality is the result of paganism and rebellion and therefore the antithesis of the covenant and character of God

Homoerotic activity can be used to serve ungodliness, but (we have argued) it can be the natural sexuality of some believers

- Divine intention for human sexuality was male and female, in this his image is revealed and procreation can take place - homosexuality is sterile

He primary purpose for human sexuality is relationship not procreation, from that perspective a homosexual relationship is not different from that of a childless couple which also has sacred value

- The uncertainty about lesbian and gay origins is not an issue; therapy and ministry have shown examples of behaviour moderated and reoriented

Lesbian and gay healing is contentious:

- *There can appear to be remarkable stories but some have dubious endings*
- *Heterosexuals in a homosexual lifestyle can rediscover their true orientation in coming to faith*
- *Homosexuals are often taught behaviour modification in ministry or therapy but is this 'healing'? Open to real abuse*

- The appeal to 'feeling only attraction to the same sex' has no more validity than a paedophile's claim to only feel attraction towards children - quite unacceptable

Homosexual orientation is quite unlike the motivations of a paedophile that has recognised disturbed psychological roots

- If homosexuality is found to be genetic it still does not mean that all in-born traits are desirable - alcoholism appears to have a genetic base in some people but that does not make it wholesome

Homosexual orientation is quite unlike the genetic base of alcohol dependence that is destructive; covenanted lesbian and gay relationships are nurturing, strong and life giving

- Sexual fulfilment is not only to be found in the partnership of marriage but also by embracing celibacy and the love of God; this is the only option for lesbian and gay Christians if they cannot find healing

Like some heterosexuals some lesbian and gays choose to be celibate, but for the church to insist that this must be so for all homosexuals is injustice; it isn't the same as an as yet unmarried heterosexual who can hope for marriage while the lesbian or gay cannot

- Goodness and evident spirituality does not in itself make something that is wrong, right and acceptable

True godliness is self-evident; Jesus says, "By their fruits you will know them", a true spirituality with genuine Christlike character demands we re-examine some of our understandings of right and wrong. The call is to holiness, godliness and to 'glorify God in your body' (1Cor 6:20); the single most significant challenge to both the 'Traditional' and 'Conditional' views is an undeniable spirituality that proclaims the character of God

- Jesus gives no indication that he would have endorsed homosexual behaviour

The Jesus traditions are silent on the matter but everything we are told about him suggests that he would have embraced those whose sexual orientation was genuinely homosexual

Consider...

- That there are hermeneutic approaches and skills that the church still has to develop which will show the 'Traditional' and 'Conditional' views to be mistaken; there have been so many advances in this area in recent decades that this is very likely to be the case
- That careful Bible interpretation is vital, it must be clear and convincing; beware of speculative exegesis that tries to find some support for homosexuality in passages such as:
 - David and Jonathan (2Sam 1:26)
 - Jesus and the beloved disciple (Jn 13:23)
 - Naked youth in Gethsemane (Mk 14:51)
 - Mary and Martha as lesbian lovers not 'sisters' (Lk 10:39)
 - The centurion's 'beloved' slave was his homosexual lover (Lk 7:2)
 - Early church 'blessings' as same-sex recognitions (as suggested by Boswell)
 - Arguments such as these only detract from the strong hermeneutical case that can be made on other grounds
- That the Bible opposes all promiscuity and perversion; this is as widespread in the secular lesbian and gay community as it is in the heterosexual world - homosexual Christians will join their heterosexual sisters and brothers in challenging it in word and lifestyle
- That the Bible speaks into a world of paganism, sexual licence, men and 'non-men' where heterosexuals were engaged in frequent same-sex activity; it does not have the cultural and social perspective to speak understand or engage with the experience of homosexual orientation
- That same-sex orientation presents real personal challenges to many Christians:
 - The emotions of deep historic prejudice continue to influence Christian thinking
 - Homosexual orientation has to be taken 'on trust', it cannot be 'proved' it has simply to be accepted
 - It is always difficult to truly understand and be empathic with those who are different
 - The idea of oral and anal sex creates an irrational revulsion in many Christians
 - The 'camp' and promiscuous lifestyles of some secular lesbian and gays prevent many Christians from feeling the pain and rejection the community feel and gives an invalid excuse to dismiss them
- That covenanted same-sex penetration and intimacy is not sin
- That this really is a truth and justice issue that the church has failed at every level to express compassion and understanding about

SEX AND DEBATE

Overlooked orientations



There are some aspects of sexuality that Christians seem simply not to talk about. However, whatever view we take of them, our understanding of sexuality is hampered if we ignore them.

Sexual orientation is often treated as being solely about which gender(s) a person finds attractive. Churches often overlook other aspects of sexual orientation even more than the rest of society. However, if we are to address issues of sexuality seriously, we must be aware of them and ask ourselves tough questions about our attitudes towards them as Christians.

So here's a brief look at "sexualities that Christians don't talk about".

BDSM, Fetish and Kink

BDSM stands for "Bondage, Dominance and Sadomasochism". It is a broad term for a range of orientations and practices that tend to involve one or both of the following:

- Voluntary submission and dominance in a sexual context
- The use of pain or restraint as sexually appealing

Such tendencies form a small part of the orientations and practices of many people whose sexuality appears more "mainstream". The phrase "BDSM" tends to be applied to those for whom such things are a major part of their sexuality. The term usually describes consensual practices only.

The word "fetish" refers to a sexual interest in a particular item or activity. Although the word is stereotypically identified with images of (for example) hand-cuffs and footwear, fetishes tend to vary considerably. Like BDSM, fetish challenges our definition of what is sexual, reminding us that penetrative vaginal sex is not everyone's main sexual focus.

BDSM and fetish often overlap, and some who have orientations in this area find neither term to be satisfactory. Many describe their sexuality as "kinky" to indicate that it is different from the mainstream but cannot be easily be defined. "Kinky" people often use the term "vanilla" to describe more mainstream orientations (on the basis that it's the most popular flavour, but not the only one).

Most people whose orientation involves BDSM, fetish or kink place a strong emphasis on meaningful adult consent. Some say that they discuss consent and desire with their partners in more depth than most people. Many are involved in loving and monogamous, relationships.

Polyamory and open fidelity

There are a range of sexual expressions which are not monogamous. Many people speak as if the only two alternatives were lifelong monogamy or promiscuity. In reality, the options are more complicated.

People who practise polyamory argue that faithfulness and commitment need not be limited to couples. There are committed relationships involving three or four (or more)

people who are all sexually active with each other but not with anyone outside of the group. Such relationships are committed and faithful. People in such relationships argue that it is as possible for a group of people to love each other as it is for a couple.

There are variations on this sort of arrangement which are less exclusive. For example, some polyamorists belong to overlapping groups of partners. Some go further than polyamory and engage in sexual activity with a range of partners, some not involving relationships, but emphasise that they are honest with all their partners and treat them with respect. Supporters of such an approach sometimes use the phrase “open fidelity”.

Honesty is strongly emphasised by those who practise polyamory and/or open fidelity. They see their approach as preferable to the hypocrisy that assumes that marriage is always better than other relationships, even marriages that involve adultery, dishonesty or secret use of pornography or prostitution.

Consent and justice

Christians have a variety of views on the ethics of the sexual expressions described above. However, if we are to take sexual orientation seriously it is vital that we consider them carefully and neither ignore them nor assume that they are wrong without thinking about it.

There are Christians who comfortably practise BDSM or polyamory. Others are horrified by this, thinking them incompatible with Christian commitment. Yet others have orientations in these directions, but struggle with developing a faithfully Christian approach to their sexuality. There are also those who find some of the above sexual expressions acceptable but not all of them; for example, they might be OK with polyamory but not with open fidelity, or OK with dominance and submission but not with physical pain. As we struggle to seek God's guidance in this confusing situation, let us avoid the temptation to fall back on the easy option of a set of rules.

While the above sexualities all involve consenting adults, we might wish to say that adult consent is only the most basic starting-point for sexual ethics, not the only thing that matters. As Christians, we are likely to look for love and justice in sexual relationships as well as consent. However, many insist that there are kinky and polyamorous relationships that involve love and justice, similarly, there are some conventional marriages that involve abuse.

Non-consensual orientations

The above sexualities all involve consenting adults, but it would be dishonest to ignore the reality that there are those whose orientation is towards children or animals, neither of whom are in a position to give consent.

It is obvious that such people must be strongly discouraged from acting on their sexual instincts. However, churches are unlikely to do this by ignoring the situation or making it hard for people with such instincts to talk with their church leaders or others in a position to offer pastoral care.

As Christians we must ask ourselves searching questions about how our churches treat people with non-consensual orientations. We are called to love people in this situation and many of them may be going through excessively difficult and prayerful struggles not to act on their orientation. However, this is not the only reason for supporting them in their struggles: such help may play a vital part in preventing abuse.

Questions

1. How would you describe the concept of 'sexual orientation'?
2. Why are most Christians reluctant to talk about forms of sexual orientation other than homosexuality?
3. On what basis might a Christian decide in favour, or against, a range of sexual practices explored by different orientations?

Reading and Resources

- M Althaus-Reid *'Indecent Theology'* Routledge 2000
D Atkinson *'Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship'* Eerdmans 1981
Molly Devon and Philip Miller *'Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns: the romance and sexual sorcery of sadomasochism'* Mystic Rose 2002
L Faderman *'Surpassing the Love of Men'* William Morrow 1981
D Field *'The Homosexual Way - a Christian Option?'* Grove 1980
RB Hays *'The Moral Vision of the New Testament'* T&T Clarke 1996
Jo Ind, *'Memories of Bliss: God, Sex and Us'* SCM Press 2003
J John *'Permanent, Faithful, Stable: Christian Same Sex Partnerships'* Darton Longman & Todd 1993
G Hopper *'Reluctant Journey'* GSE Hopper 1999
M Macourt [Ed] *'Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation'* SCM 1977
Mennonite Church *'Human Sexuality in the Christian Life'* Life & Faith Press 1990
H Montefiore & J Dominionian *'God, Sex and Love'* SCM 1989
L Pierson *'No-Gay Areas'* Grove 1989
M Soards *'Scripture and Homosexuality'* John Knox Press 1995
A Thatcher *'Liberating Sex: A Christian Sexual Theology'* SPCK 1993
A Thatcher & E Stuart [Ed] *'Christians Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender'* Eerdmans 1996
M Vasey *'Evangelical Christians and Gay Rights'* Grove 1991
M Vasey *'Strangers and Friends'* Hodder 1995