

**Created by God:
Christianity and
Homosexuality in the
21st Century**

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Introduction

Since the early 1950s the Church of England has acknowledged the need for informed debate on the subject of homosexuality. Essential to this (as the 1978 and 1988 Lambeth Conference resolutions recognised) were not just the importance of the Scriptures and Tradition, but also the findings of scientific and medical research and the experience of gay and lesbian people themselves.

The earlier working parties set up by the Church of England clearly acknowledged the importance of science and medicine by the inclusion of experts in these areas alongside clergy, moral theologians and lawyers. The reports they produced in 1954 and 1979 include significant overviews of the scientific research findings at that time, with the material drawn from primary sources. There was a determined effort to be objective about the scientific evidence: 'The Working Party attempted to discover and assess the medical evidence as objectively as it could and set down what seemed to be the facts of the matter, whether the facts were to the liking of all its members or not'. It is disturbing, therefore, to note that the Lambeth Conference resolution of 1998 omits any reference to science and medicine. This omission is also evident in the two most recent C of E reports, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (1991) and *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* (2003) produced by the House of Bishops which appear to have no input from experts in science and medicine. Instead the report *Some Issues*, which is more than four times as long as the 1979 Report, includes 'medicine' in the chapter 'Homosexuality and biblical teaching' and directs readers to conservative Christian writers for a summary of contemporary scientific knowledge. Liberal Christian writers whose writings more closely reflect the majority view of the scientific community are discounted.² The objectivity demonstrated by the Working Party of 1979 would seem to have vanished.

However, not only have recent reports lost the contributions of science and medicine, there is a paucity of testimony from gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in *Some Issues*, although even the 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution stated the commitment to 'continue to listen to the experience of homosexual persons'. Again this omission is surprising, since even the Working Parties of the 1950's, when homosexuality was still illegal, considered contributions from gay and lesbian people themselves as essential evidence.

We can only have an informed debate about the insights of Scripture and Tradition if we know what we are considering. Furthermore, most of the negative ways of talking about the subject have no scientific basis and if we get rid of these we might have a climate in which gay and lesbian people are enabled to contribute without fear. Sadly so much Christian thinking seems to be done using pre-scientific views.

Distorted Sexual Desire? - not according to Science

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Britain in 1968; and in 1983 it was finally removed from the International Classification of Diseases, since the medical community had recognised that it was not an illness or sign of arrested development. Both heterosexuality and homosexuality (though less common) are considered normal.⁴

Psychiatrists, behavioural psychologists and neuroscientists believe that sexual orientation is partly determined genetically at conception, and partly by hormonal influences on the developing foetus in the womb, and that sexual orientation is complete and fixed by the time of birth. The current state of knowledge is well described in a recently published and accessible paperback⁵ and in a University review.⁶

A brief summary of the evidence is as follows. Surveys which include tests of bodily reactions are the most reliable, and indicate that about 2 to 3.5% of men are homosexual, 0.5 to 1.5% of women are lesbian, and 1-2% are bisexual. Homosexuality is stable and constant, having been recorded in every period of history, and appears constant across cultures in all parts of the world.

Although homosexual people generally have few children, the continuation of homosexuality through the generations as dormant recessive genes is entirely compatible with genetic theory. Evidence for a genetic factor is from family studies. These show that homosexuality does cluster in families in the way that Darwinian theory predicts. Bailey and Pillard⁷ collected 110 pairs of male twins, half being identical twins and half fraternal, and all the pairs had at least one homosexual twin. 52% of the identical second twins, and 22% of the fraternal second twins, were also homosexual. Similar but slightly lower concordance rates were found in females. This has been confirmed in other studies. If there were no genetic factor operating, the second twin would be homosexual in only 4% to 5% of the identical twin pairs at most. A 50% genetic predisposition to homosexuality is therefore present in people who become homosexual, and there must also be a 50% other factor as well, which can only be in the environment. The environmental factor may operate before birth in the intrauterine environment, or after birth, in the community.

Considering first the possible environmental factors operating on the child after birth, a poor relationship with the parents was for a long time thought to be important. This is the Freudian theory which held that early mental development was dependent on the relationship with the parents; a good relationship of a boy with his mother would transfer in late childhood to good heterosexual relationships with girls and women, and a corresponding situation was proposed between girls and their father. This idea is now abandoned, with many studies showing that there is no correlation between homosexuality and a poor relationship with the parents in early life.

Another possible environmental factor which was considered was 'seduction', leading to addiction, as with tobacco or drugs. Parents are understandably concerned that their children may fall into 'bad' company, leading them into homosexual practices and so becoming lifelong homosexuals. A major survey has shown that people who attend same sex boarding schools are three times more likely to have homosexual experiences, by experimenting with their peers, than people at mixed schools.' But in later life, five years or more after leaving the boarding school, the proportion still having homosexual activities was reduced from 12% to 4%, no more than the national average as then measured. So attending a same sex boarding school has no effect on the likelihood of becoming homosexual, and any early homosexual experiences do not prove addictive. Additional evidence comes from the Sambia tribe of New Guinea, where young boys are used homosexually, but when they reach young adult years they

are expected to marry women and have heterosexual sex. Their adult homosexual rate is much the same as in other countries

These findings exclude the possible environmental factors after birth, so the 50% environmental factor must be operating before birth in the womb, and prenatal development will now be considered.

With the child's sex, male or female, being fixed at conception, it is surprising to find that it is not possible to tell by looking at a six month foetus whether it is a boy or a girl; the sexual organs have not differentiated. But at that time, the baby's circulation is flooded with sex hormone, predominantly oestrogen in a girl and predominantly testosterone in a boy. These hormones are chemically similar and their pharmacology is well understood. The sex hormones have two targets. One is the sexual tissues in the pelvis, which rapidly develop and differentiate into the sex organs, which are the ovary, fallopian tube and uterus in the female and the equivalent sex organs in the male. The other target organ is the hypothalamus in the base of the brain. This is the part of the brain concerned with sexual attraction. The effect of the sex hormone on the hypothalamus is to organise the nerve cells in it to provide the hard wiring which produces the appropriate mental and physical responses to a sexually stimulating situation, which in a heterosexual person will be the appearance of an attractive person of the opposite sex, but homosexual people will be aroused by the appearance of someone of the same sex. So the hypothalamus becomes programmed to recognise one sex or the other as sexually attractive. We know this because the hypothalamus is visibly and functionally different in heterosexuals and in homosexuals. This can be seen by animal experiments in which surgical alteration of the hypothalamus leads to marked changes in the animal's sexual behaviour; also by post mortem examination of the hypothalamus in hetero- and homosexual humans; and the differences can be seen in live people by a sensitive brain scanning system called positron emission tomography. It is clear from this that the hormonal development of the hypothalamus is different in homosexual people. In homosexual males the brain acts like a female one and recognises men as sexually attractive, and in homosexual females the brain acts like a male one in recognising females as sexually attractive.⁶

Support for this comes from two rare intersex medical conditions.^{5,9} In both of these the situations regarding the sex hormones are substantially altered; in one condition, 'androgen insensitivity syndrome', the person is genetically male but the body tissues are insensitive to the male hormone; they are convincingly female from birth and grow up as women, and almost all are sexually attracted to men, though they remain infertile. In the other condition, 'congenital adrenal hyperplasia', the person is genetically female, but has a tumour (ie overgrowth) of the adrenal gland, which causes an overproduction of *male* sex hormone, and they may therefore develop male type genitalia. If diagnosed early, one option is to be treated by surgery and hormones so that they grow up as heterosexual women. If untreated, they may grow into adulthood as males, or as females with a high probability of being lesbian.

Returning now to population studies, it has been shown that, after the first two male children, there is a higher incidence of homosexuality in subsequently born male children. This is not the case with high birth order females. The only other known

condition which is more common in high birth order people is rhesus disease, which affects newborn babies. In this the foetus has the Rhesus protein in its blood and the mother does not have it in hers. This means that the foetus' blood is not fully compatible with the mother's. The mother produces antibodies to the rhesus protein, just as she would to the protein of an infecting organism, or the protein of an incompatible blood transfusion. But the mother's resulting antibody reaction develops slowly, over a number of pregnancies, and only becomes effective on the unborn child in the higher birth order pregnancies. A similar process is suggested by the fact that the mother bearing a boy foetus has a foreign protein in her body, the Y (male) chromosome that boys inherit from their father. In some cases a mother's immune reaction against this foreign protein may modify the Y antigen sufficiently to reduce the effect of the testosterone on the unborn boy's hypothalamus.' As noted above, the hypothalamus determines the type of person that is regarded as sexually attractive, and with the altered testosterone the hypothalamus may be programmed into the female state in which males are seen as attractive, ie creating a same-sex attraction. These conditions are rare and homosexuality is in the great majority of cases not associated with any medical disorder. All biological systems have differences within a range of values, whether blood pressure, adult height, haemoglobin level etc, which make each person in the world unique. A male foetus with a normal but relatively high oestrogen level and low testosterone level during brain development in pregnancy may therefore become homosexual in the normal course of events.

Two unusual childhood situations provide additional evidence. Rarely a young boy has an accident to his penis that severely damages it, sometimes as a result of an accident during a circumcision procedure. In past years, since the penis could not be recreated surgically, the genitals were altered to make them appear female and the parents were advised to bring the child up as a girl. But later in the preteen or teen years the child strongly asserted his maleness, which further compounded his problem.⁶ Secondly, children are sometimes brought up by lesbian or gay parents, and a number of studies worldwide have shown that this is successful; the children are not more likely to become homosexual than would be expected in a heterosexual family.¹⁰ The only difference that has been observed is that the children of gay parents are more likely to see being lesbian and gay in a positive light, but any adolescent experimentation in that direction does not ultimately affect their adult sexual orientation.

In summary, the evidence is clear that sexual orientation, whether hetero or homosexual, is not under the control of the voluntary will, it is an automatic form of reflex action between the body and brain. Modern scientific research indicates that sexual orientation is determined by the time of birth, partly by genetics, but more specifically by hormonal activity in the womb arising from various sources.

This is not entirely new information, and the medical profession has accepted for almost fifty years that homosexuality is a normal human variant. In the 1960's the Freudian theories fell into disrepute because of the experimental evidence against them, as briefly described above. Also, at that time it was still the practice for people prosecuted for homosexuality to be punished, often by imprisonment, with the option of agreeing to undergo psychiatric treatment. The 'treatment' was aversion therapy, by

showing attractive pictures of people of the same sex accompanied by an electric shock, or by an injection of a drug that caused immediate vomiting. Needless to say, the ‘patients’ reported a rapid ‘conversion’ to heterosexuality to stop the ‘treatment’. The British Medical Journal¹¹ produced an edition with articles by psychiatrists who were giving this ‘treatment’ up to the 1960’s, who say they were under orders to do this by their seniors and refusal would have reduced their career prospects. The suicide of the famous scientist Alan Turing, inventor of the computer, after being convicted of homosexuality and undergoing this ‘treatment’, was a significant event in the abolition of the classification of homosexuality as an illness.

Some Christian organisations are taking the same view. Jeremy Marks, who founded the evangelical Christian charity ‘Courage’ which offered such counselling, confirms this. He states that it became ‘manifestly obvious that for all the repentance, self-discipline, prayer, teaching and Bible study, the deeper needs for intimate companionship were not met and nobody became truly heterosexual’.¹² Psychiatrists and psychologists had already several years previously reached the same conclusion. Nevertheless, despite all the evidence to the contrary, some Christian counsellors still continue with pre-scientific beliefs and on the basis of anecdotal evidence claim people can and do change and thus get freed from their homosexual orientation. Sadly, when gay and lesbian people realise this does not work, too often they leave the Church and sometimes abandon their faith altogether.

If we are to look at the Scriptures and Tradition with a view which accords with modern scientific knowledge, we must accept that sexuality is more complex than was originally thought. God created male and female human beings who may be lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual. (And of course our maleness and femaleness is also more complex, as transsexuals know, but the discussion of this goes beyond this paper.) This does not mean that we are to blindly follow the spirit of the age but to recognise that ethics and doctrine need to acknowledge that the expansion of human knowledge since the late seventeenth century has drastically altered our understanding of the processes of the world. ‘In the light of evolution and science things look very different to us from the world view that dominated the first hundred years of Christianity’.¹³ We cannot therefore develop an appropriate ethic for sexuality unless we base that discussion on a modern scientific understanding of the subject. To do otherwise would be to go back to a prescientific age.

The Bishops’ claim that ‘the jury is still out on the causes of homosexuality’,² implying a deviation from the norm of heterosexuality, has no scientific foundation. While knowledge about sexuality is still developing, as in so many other areas of research, the general consensus is that heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality are all normal.

It may be true that ‘The natural law, the Creator’s very good work, provides the solid foundation on which man can build the structure of moral rules to guide his choices’.¹⁴ However, it does not therefore follow that homosexual acts are contrary to natural law because ‘they close the sexual act to the gift of life’ and ‘they do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity’.¹⁴ What is natural needs to

be informed by scientific knowledge if we are to understand the ‘Creator’s very good work’ and to build an ethic on this.

We Cannot Keep Sexuality in the Bedroom

Sexual relationships include but are wider than genital relationships. Nevertheless, as Jack Dominian states, ‘For over three thousand years the Judaeo-Christian tradition has based its sexual morality on the link between intercourse and procreation. But the advent of widespread and reliable contraception has now severed this link’.¹⁵ Throughout the world sexual relationships have shaped the world as we know it and all societies have developed rules to control them, as it was recognised they could be a source of good or ill. In the past, many marriages were often contracted for political or economic reasons, rather than romantic attachment of two individuals. This structuring of society has bearing, now as then, on how people are valued in a society, how individuals relate to each other and the ways in which they are enabled to contribute and partake.

Like heterosexual people, those who are gay and lesbian want to give and receive love. For those who are Christian, ‘Human sexuality in all its richness is a gift of God gladly to be accepted, enjoyed and honoured as a way of expressing and growing in love, in accordance with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Therefore it is their conviction that it is entirely compatible with the Christian faith not only to love another person of the same sex but also to express that love fully in a personal sexual relationship.’¹⁶

Jack Dominian in *A Guide to Loving* describes how loving relationships can flourish and endure over a lifetime. Most of his book is concerned with marriage, but there is also a chapter on homosexuality. He acknowledges that there are disputes about certain biblical references and concludes that ‘unless a particular biblical reference is embedded in love it does not truly express the word of God’.¹⁷ He sees homosexuals and heterosexuals as children of God and needing to give and receive love; ‘I have no doubt that such permanent relationships of love are good from the human point of view, because they encourage sustaining, healing and growth’ and furthermore that such a loving relationship respects... the destiny of God for them.’¹⁸

Just like their straight brothers and sisters, gay people want to be able to play a full part in society with their relationships recognised and supported. The opportunity to register Civil Partnerships from December 2005 has enabled this to happen and many gay and lesbian couples, whose relationships have already lasted the test of time, are taking this step. At a recent civil partnership we attended sex was not even mentioned and the stress was on mutual support and faithfulness. Even though such ceremonies are not permitted to be religious it was reminiscent of I Corinthians 13 and is a challenge to the Church’s narrow concentration on genital sex in its debates on sexuality.

For myself (GC), someone single for many years and now married, I know how valuable the support of a partner can be for me as a person and as a priest. When I was Chaplain to Rampton Hospital my husband regularly attended the afternoon

service and became a friend to many patients. No one accused me of ‘flaunting my partner’ because we were a heterosexual married couple.

The same can also be true for same sex partnerships. When I was a child we were very aware of three female partnerships. Four of these women were highly respected teachers and two were active in Christian youth work. All made a rich contribution to the development of young people. We never thought to question if they were lesbian or whether, as a result of the high death rate among men in the First World War, they had no choice. We simply respected them as individuals and took their close commitment to their partner as a given. Those close relationships nurtured the individuals involved and they made a very rich contribution to the community in which they lived. Homophobic literature depicts the acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships as weakening marriage and the family, but those women’s contribution added to the building of families. Unfortunately, the same would not have been possible for men at that time as homosexuality was still illegal. Furthermore, the present climate both within and outside the churches which demands to know more about what anyone in the public eye does in private, would no doubt have caused much more strain to the individuals concerned and hence limited their ability to contribute to their communities.

It’s All in the Good Book - or is it?

A student once claimed the Bible is against homosexuality from Genesis to Revelation, and from the opposition to homosexuality shown by many Christians one would expect that to be the case. In fact the Bible has very little to say on the matter of homosexuality and we have no recorded words of Jesus on the subject at all. Furthermore, when we consider the references that are so often quoted, they may not refer to homosexuality as we understand it today. Liberals have no wish to ignore biblical teaching, but are not content with making superficial assumptions about interpretation. They want to understand the writer’s intentions by reading the texts in the light of their social and historical context.

The traditional church teaching is that marriage between one man and one woman is seen as the only ‘biblical’ relationship in which sex should take place and outside marriage celibacy is the expected norm. Underlying this are the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 which are used to emphasise the distinctiveness of men and women and their attraction for each other, which is in accord with God’s command to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. This is seen to exclude same sex attraction which cannot result in procreation.

This concentration on procreation ignores the fact that in the second account of creation, the story tells that God’s intention in creating Eve for Adam was companionship. This close bonding is something which gay and straight people can both enjoy. Furthermore, as Michael Vasey says, ‘It is simplistic to see the story of Adam and Eve as providing a biblical mandate for the isolated nuclear family of Western culture. These great chapters are intended to provide the backcloth to the whole complex story of the ordering of human society... “one flesh” refers to the creation of a new kinship group (cf Genesis 29.14).¹⁹ Furthermore, it would seem that too much is

being read into the Genesis account. What is a descriptive story is not only being used to establish an 'ought' but also an 'ought not', which does not necessarily follow.

Nevertheless, *Some Issues* still claimed on the basis of traditional interpretation that 'the description in Genesis 2 of a permanent exclusive union between one man and one woman ordained by God provides the benchmark by which to assess all the various alternative forms of sexual activity and relationship that the Old Testament describes.'²⁰ Have they forgotten how developing views of cosmology, evolution and the use of analgesia in childbirth forced a reluctant Church to recognise that their earlier interpretations of Genesis 1-3 were inadequate to accommodate increased scientific knowledge? Such recognition developed but did not destroy the Christian faith.

On marriage, Jesus and the New Testament generally are decidedly ambivalent. Indeed, it would be true to say that marriage and the family have a pretty poor press in the New Testament. Family and marital ties were to be subordinated to the needs of the Kingdom because of the belief that the present world order was about to end. Nevertheless, Jesus and Paul as Jews would have taken heterosexual marriage for granted and the desire for offspring an integral part of this.

Before discussing New Testament texts which appear to refer to homosexuality, we need to consider the Old Testament teaching on the subject, with which the New Testament writers would have been familiar.

Old Testament

It is important to look at the whole of the Old Testament teaching rather than search for the well known anti-gay texts if we are to do justice to the Scriptural teaching. The writers would not have understood our contemporary recognition of a gay identity, because it is a recent discovery. Much background writing too is in the context of Israel's resistance to the idolatry of her neighbours. However, it is important to note that we do have in the Scriptures positive images of same sex bonding. The stories of Jonathan and David are well known as is the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law. While there is no suggestion that these relationships were sexual, we do need to note the value of these same sex relationships as we examine the more negative 'proof texts' against homosexuality. Their closeness and loyalty to each other amidst adversity is represented in a very positive way. The deepness of the relationship between Jonathan and David is stressed several times - 'Jonathan made a pact with David to love him as his own soul' (1 Sam. 8,3), and protects him when his father Saul becomes jealous of David who will become king instead of him.

Nevertheless, as Jeffrey John points out, many Christians still read scripture in a fundamentalist way without giving sufficient regard to the social and historical context.²¹ Nowhere is this more true than the way the story of Sodom (Gen. 19) has been used because from it we have the word 'sodomy'. (A similar story is told in Judges 19.) However, it is now recognised that it is not actually about homosexuality. The sin of the men of Sodom was to threaten the visitors with gang rape. We now recognise that rape is rarely about sex and is more about power and humiliation and even when it is carried out by men on men it is mostly perpetrated by straight men not

gay. For the Israelite, the breach of hospitality was the major crime, and although we may deplore Lot's offer of his daughters as substitute victims, this would have been Lot's motivation. Jeffrey John comments 'Indeed, for centuries afterwards the "sin of Sodom" was perceived not as homosexuality but as the contravention of the rules of hospitality, as it was clearly understood by Jesus himself in Matthew 10,14-15.¹² The links with homosexuality developed more in the inter-testamental period when homosexuality was seen as a specifically 'Gentile sin' and more will be said about this as we look at the New Testament.

More specific references to homosexuality would seem to be found in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 18,22 and 20,13. Countryman's book²³ concentrates on the theme of purity, which he demonstrates was of prime importance to Israel. Hence cross dressing (Deut.22,5) would be seen as polluting, since women were seen as a greater source of pollution due to menstruation and childbirth. This is the only reference to cross dressing in the Bible. The Holiness Code included not only laws about sexual acts, but also covered a much wider range of 'sins' including much we would not classify as moral issues (eg sowing two kinds of grain in a field or wearing a garment made of two different types of fabric. Lev. 19,19). The main aim was to keep Israel pure and distinct from her non-Israelite neighbours, and to prevent her contamination by foreign people and ideas. Stoning men who commit homosexual acts would be seen as the removal of contamination from the community. As James Nelson points out 'The uncompromising condemnation in Leviticus is clear, though it must be understood in the context of the concern for cultic purity in the face of defiling pagan incursions as well as beliefs about male dignity and the non-procreative loss of the revered life-bearing semen in a patriarchal culture.'²⁴

The Old Testament is, therefore, not so clearly condemning homosexuality as has been traditionally believed. Certainly if we take into account our modern knowledge about sexual orientation and the historical and social context of the Old Testament references, we can legitimately claim they are not relevant to our modern discussion. For the Old Testament writers two men engaging in a sexual act would have been doing something contrary to their true nature. Today we can recognise that this is in accord with the sexuality of those who are gay or lesbian.

New Testament

Vasey stresses the importance of friendship in the ministry of Jesus and in the life of the early church. He points out that at that time same sex groupings were culturally acceptable in a way we would find alien today, particularly in middle class society, and Jesus' group of disciples would have been one such group. He also highlights three characteristics in Jesus' offering of friendship that are particularly evocative for gay people: The first is his close friendship with the apostle John, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 13.23, 19.26, 20.2, 21.20). This is described in St John's Gospel in terms of deepest intimacy although he is not suggesting there is a sexual element involved. Secondly, he points to the welcome Jesus gave 'to those whom society regarded as beyond the pale' which for gay people who are so often stigmatised is particularly reassuring, although it was roundly condemned by Jesus' religious critics. Thirdly

there is the reassurance of 1 John 4.16 that God is love. Vasey comments ‘Straight people are quick to see in the love and intimacy that they experience a pale reflection of divine love’ and asks ‘why gay people should not be allowed the same freedom’.²⁵

Critics of homosexuality ignore material like the above and concentrate on the few references in the epistles, which we will now consider. However, firstly we need to note that, as Countryman points out, for the New Testament writer same sex relationships would not have been the same as we understand them today: ‘The classic form of same-sex relationships was pederastic’. In Greece ‘the youth was typically freeborn and the relationship could be quite open, approved, and honorable’ and in Rome ‘the beloved was more commonly a slave and entirely at his master’s bidding; and freemen did not like to surrender control of their sons in this particular way’. In addition, male prostitutes serviced both sexes.²⁶

Vasey suggests that the relationship between the centurion and the servant he asked Jesus to heal (Luke 7, 1-10, and Matt. 8, 5-13) may well have been an example of those cited above.²⁷ Jesus commended the centurion’s faith. He did not criticise the relationship. Nelson points out that the assumption for the writers of the Epistles about those who indulged in homosexual acts would have been that they were ‘heterosexual persons who freely chose to act contrary to their own “natural” inclinations’.²⁸

Paul’s comments in Romans 1,26-27 must be read in context of the above. He states that by turning to idolatry and away from the one true God, men and women open themselves up to all sorts of evil practices. The unnatural practices referred to are probably not the equal partnerships of gay men and lesbian women that we see today. To be ‘without honour, love and pity’ is certainly no truer of gay partnerships than of heterosexual marriages.

The exact meanings of the words translated in 1 Corinthians 6.9 in the RSV as ‘sexual perverts’ are not clear and other translators have used different words; the Jerusalem Bible has ‘catamites’ and ‘sodomites’, interpreted as those who take the active and passive role in penetrative sex. As Vasey points out ‘The difficulty arises because the precise meaning of the terms is not known and people tend to translate them in the light of their existing perceptions of current or first century homosexuality.’ However, since the word ‘malakoi’ is not usually used to indicate sex with men it is probably better to translate it, as Vasey argues, as ‘wanton’ or ‘loose living’. The derivation of ‘arsenokoitai’ does, however, indicate male and sex, and occurs again in 1 Tim 1, 8-9. Vasey concludes ‘It is likely that it carries those connotations of slavery, idolatry and social dominance that were associated with corrupt Roman society’.²⁹

If we discard fundamentalist methods, we do not find clear evidence that the Bible is against homosexuality from Genesis to Revelation. Indeed there is remarkably little about the subject and what is there probably does not refer to homosexuality as we understand it today. The biblical writers certainly took heterosexuality for granted and could not have been expected to understand that some people are naturally homosexual. It is going beyond the biblical evidence, therefore, to state that it clearly forbids homosexual practice when it takes place between equals.

Silenced Voices

This section describes the English situation, although we also need to remember that the plight of gay people in many countries is far worse than in Britain. A letter in the Church Times pointed out that most of those Anglican Primates who are most vociferously opposed 'preside in countries that are among those with the most repressive legislation and worst human-rights abuses against gay and lesbian people in the world. Amnesty International, refugee workers and many human-rights groups can testify to this'.³⁰ Gay people were a target for persecution in the Holocaust, but are frequently forgotten victims at remembrance events. In discussing the situation at home, let us not forget these others. As Alex Adkins points out 'The refusal to enter sympathetically into the experience of your neighbour is certainly not part of traditional Christian teaching'.³¹

According to the 1991 Bishop's Statement, 'The Church has begun to listen to its homosexual brothers and sisters, and must deepen and extend that listening, finding through joint prayer and reflection a truer understanding and the love that casts out fear'.³² This aspiration would be good, but in practice the reverse so often seems to happen. Heterosexual men and women are free to voice their views about homosexuality openly, whether or not what they say is knowledgeable, ignorant or plainly libellous and offensive. In contrast to this, those who know from the inside what it is like to grow up and live as a gay or lesbian person in our society risk being ostracised or persecuted if they are open and honest.

The Bishops' 'rule' on gay clergy which has often been summed up in the words 'don't ask, don't tell', is a clear example of this. It is in fact a command to 'keep silent' and not to share openly their experience. Unfortunately, as Jeffrey John points out this tends to distort the picture in the church, particularly among those bishops who are known to have negative views: 'The only gay clergy they get to know about are the ones who get into trouble. They are then prone to view all gay people in the same light - which bolsters the negative views they had in the first place... Several bishops seem quite unaware of the numbers of gay clergy in their dioceses who live in good, sustaining and faithful gay partnerships. One or two have even announced that they have no practising gay clergy in their diocese at all, to the grim amusement of the 'non-existent clergy in question'!³³ Those priests who have offered a ceremony to same sex couples, have found that most will choose lifelong vows and that the durability of these relationships is at least as good as those taking marriage vows, even though the latter have more legal and social support and the former have constantly to cope with hostility from the church and society generally. It is a myth that the majority of gay men are naturally promiscuous - a small number are, but the remainder are less promiscuous than the average heterosexual man. The vast majority of those who are arrested for cottaging are married men and others who keep their sexuality secret and those not in stable relationships. The fact that many established gay and lesbian couples have chosen to register civil partnerships is a testimony to this fact.

The depth of commitment and capacity for self-sacrificing love has been seen most clearly in the way the gay community has responded to the AIDS epidemic. If Christ's words that we can distinguish false prophets from good by their fruits mean

anything, we can surely see evidence of it here. Elizabeth Stuart comments ‘It revealed the extraordinary love, devotion and sense of connectedness and kinship that exists in the lesbian and gay community’.³⁴ Sadly gay partners have in the past sometimes received no recognition. Jeffrey John states ‘The experience of AIDS produced countless heartbreaking stories of gay partners, one of whom had nursed the other through sickness, being separated from one another at the deathbed and funeral by hostile parents, who in law were accorded the final right to the body of a son whom they might have rejected and ignored for years.’³⁵ Until Civil Partnerships were legally recognised (something vigorously opposed by traditionalist Christians) gay couples lacked the rights that married couples enjoyed over home, property and recognition of being next of kin when it came to sickness and funeral arrangements. Fortunately, however, the changes have now happened and those who have registered their partnerships will have their relationships legally recognised as do married couples.

Jeffrey John considers that the Bishops’ Statement (1991) which demands celibacy from gay and lesbian clergy is mistaken. He points to the Statement’s acceptance of gay laity, whose relationships are to be accepted and supported by their fellow Christians recognising that ‘such couples can be a blessing to the world around them, and... achieve great, even heroic sacrifice and devotion’. The Bishops demanded celibacy from gay clergy on the basis that the clergy are called to be role models. This, John believes, is a false argument because there is a need for gay Christians to be role models of permanent, faithful, stable relationships within the secular gay scene. Furthermore, ‘Knowing an ordinary gay couple is the best antidote to prejudice and the best way of destroying the ludicrous stereotypes and suspicions that still lurk in the mind of many... Fortunately, this does seem to be the most frequent experience of clergy and others who take the risk of letting their relationships be known to those around them. It is only by helping good relationships to be seen that healing will come - for everyone.’³⁶ Sadly, the Church so often ensures that this witness is invisible and silent.

Nevertheless, it is not just within the Church, but in society generally that this silencing goes on and it begins early. Even though gay and lesbian people are more visible today, our society is still basically straight. Most young people will be brought up in families which reflect this, including one parent families. (This is in no way a criticism of heterosexual families, but simply to point out that as a predominantly white society needs to address the needs of ethnic minorities, so a predominantly heterosexual society also needs to look at the needs of those who are gay and lesbian.) As a young person grows up they and others will expect that they will be attracted to the opposite sex, eventually marry (or live together with their partner) and produce children. Adolescents want to be affirmed by their peers and having a desirable boyfriend or girlfriend is part of that.

A gay or lesbian young person will realise that they do not quite fit in with these expected norms. Sometimes they may try to conform in an effort to appear ‘normal’. In addition, despite all the efforts of schools, bullying does happen, and ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are today used as terms of abuse, whether or not those terms describe the targeted victim. All this contributes to creating a hostile environment for the gay young person struggling with their sexuality. This lowers their self-respect and they

may feel very isolated, since they may well not know others who are like themselves, even if outwardly they seem to be a part of a social group.

The notorious Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1986 (now repealed) stated that ‘A local authority shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; or promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.’ Section 28 created a climate of fear and confusion for teachers. Although schools and teachers may have wanted to provide support and guidance to all their pupils, many were very fearful about discussing homosexuality in sex education, even though they were not actually covered by this legislation. Well funded Christian fundamentalist groups, such as the Christian Institute, vociferously campaigned to keep Section 28, and to keep out of schools any published material about homosexuality which would inform the gay or lesbian young person and help change the attitudes of those who use these terms as forms of abuse. The pressure to ‘promote the family’ as opposed to same sex partnerships as ‘pretend family relationships’ silences any informed debate.

Those gay young people who seek counselling from the Church, may find clergy and other Christians sensitive and helpfully informed, but this is rare. It is often stressed that the Church wants to strengthen marriage. The gay young person may well be counselled and encouraged to marry and not to tell their intended partner, with the assumption that it will ‘cure’ their gayness. Of course, such advice is likely to be disastrous, not only for the gay or lesbian person themselves, but also for their spouse and any children they may subsequently have. Such ill-informed counselling contributes nothing to creating strong marriages.

To ‘come out’ and declare one’s sexuality is an act of courage for the gay or lesbian person. Firstly, a person has to decide who to tell and when to tell. Will their close friends reject them, will their colleagues ridicule them and will they find that their status at work is affected by being open? If they are in professions that have care of children they may well be seen as wanting to seduce those in their care. This is a completely unwarranted myth, since gay and lesbian people are no more likely to abuse than heterosexuals. Nevertheless this powerful myth has currency even among those who ought to be better informed and was frequently raised in the debate to lower the age of consent for gay men so that it was the same as for heterosexuals and lesbian women, i.e. 16. For example, the Catholic peer Lord Longford, in so many areas a champion of the underdog but clearly not of homosexuals, stated in the House of Lords debate ‘If some elderly schoolmaster seduced one of my sons it would damage him for life.’ This unfounded demonisation, of gay men in particular, is a sad reminder of all those groups who in the past were persecuted because they were perceived as different.

European Human Rights legislation forced the British government to ensure that its state legislation does not discriminate against gay people. As part of this action, the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations were agreed by Parliament in June 2003 and came into force in December. This gives gay, lesbian and bisexual people legal protection against being treated less favourably than heterosexual

colleagues regarding employment, training and most other benefits, and recognised direct and indirect discrimination. It also obliged employers to ensure that such employees are not subject to bullying or harassment because of their sexuality. The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) 2006 further extended these rights to cover other forms of discrimination such as the provision of goods, facilities, services, education and welfare. Unfortunately, the Church of England has used its political influence to gain exemptions for religious organisations. For example, these allow employers to 'discriminate if the employment "is for the purposes of an organised religion" and a particular sexual orientation is required to comply "with the doctrines of the religion", or "to avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers"'.³⁷ The pressure on gay and lesbian men and women in religious organisations to remain silent is unchanged.

Gay and lesbian people are sometimes asked why they see the need to 'come out' rather than simply keep quiet. One lesbian woman minister challenged in this way by a fellow student chaplain replied 'Why should I? You don't have to hide your relationships.' The alternative to coming out, is to remain silent. This places a tremendous burden on the gay person which may cause psychological damage and isolation of that person who must constantly fear being outed by others.

Too often gay people in our churches are invisible. The response to a request for a parish to make known its welcome of gay people is likely to be 'we don't have any gay people here', and that such a course of events would upset some existing members. But how do we know that A or B is not gay or lesbian? The churches' frequent censorious and hostile comments will not make it likely that a person will want to reveal their sexuality, even if they are a regular communicant. This even happens in churches where there are clergy who are not themselves hostile. Gay Christians are required to remain invisible and silent and those who are homophobic are allowed to continue unchallenged.

Even more revealing is a report on Christian Homophobia, which gives numerous examples of the ways in which Christian gay people have suffered at the hands of their fellow believers. Clergy and lay people, whose faith was an integral part of their lives, have been forced out of the churches. Many of these had given much fruitful service to the church but as the report comments 'Honesty and openness are not rewarded by the churches whereas deceit and secrecy are'.³⁸ In answer to the criticism by some that to change the Church's traditional teaching is tantamount to idolatry, Elizabeth Stuart points out 'It is an odd sort of idolater that seeks to serve the Church and to have the Church recognise and bless their love'.³⁹

Some of the people whose experiences are described in the report on Christian Homophobia have left the Church; some may mourn their loss of the Christian contact, but cannot face returning. Others have lost their faith and, as one man recently said, feel a deep-seated phobia about ever entering church again, although such people listen keenly to Church debates about homosexuality. Can such behaviour by Christians and the Church really reflect the love of God?

Furthermore, the scant regard for truth in what is published in some Christian literature is alarming. Homosexuality is linked to paedophilia and information from

legitimate reports is misused and misquoted. Gay people are more likely to be victims of crime than commit it. Criminological research demonstrates that those who are excluded from mainstream society are more likely to be targets of crime and this is certainly true for gay people, who may suffer ‘gay bashing’ by heterosexual young males. The church’s ‘moral’ campaigns add to their stigmatisation and far too little effort goes into supporting and befriending. Sometimes the stigmatisation becomes very personal. The ways in which Jeffrey John and Bishop Gene Robinson and their circumstances are misrepresented, and continue to be misrepresented despite repeated corrections, are examples of this. Throughout, there seems to be a continual denial of the contemporary scientific view that sexuality is innate and normal and cannot be changed. How can churches who claim to preach ‘The Truth’ have such scant regard for truth?

When Peter Tatchell gatecrashed General Synod in July 2003 and upbraided the Church for their harsh treatment of gay and lesbian people, many left because they were not prepared to listen. However, many others stayed, including the two Archbishops. Views will differ about the politics of his intervention, but many realised they agreed with what he said. If the Church is serious about listening to its lesbian and gay members, it will need to listen to the silenced voices as well as the angry ones. As the report from Lincoln quoted earlier says, ‘The refusal to enter sympathetically into the experience of your neighbour is certainly not part of traditional Christian teaching’.³¹

A New Vision

If we are true to the tradition of the Church, we will recognise that throughout its history Christians have found new insights leading to changes in what was seen as truth. The admission of the Gentiles was one such event, and Galileo’s discoveries another. Vociferous opposition took place against these new insights since many sincerely believed them to be against Scriptural teaching. More recently, as the Archbishop of Cape Town commented as the archbishops gathered for their historical meeting to discuss the crisis faced by the Anglican Communion over sexuality, the Scriptures were used to justify slavery and apartheid and to support the subordination of women. We now recognise that these ‘changes’ were in fact not contradicting Christian truth but were new insights. (The process was also true during the pre-Christian history of Israel). ‘Truths’ had been taken as self-evident because previously there had been no reason to question them, but new evidence demanded that they were re-examined in the light of that new knowledge. We have new knowledge today with regard to sexuality which demands our re-examining traditional beliefs.

Elizabeth Stuart points to the growing recognition in many areas of study that ‘there is no such thing as neutral, objective interpretation and that we bring to our hermeneutical endeavours value-laden subjective assumptions. This has led to a growing recognition in theology of the way in which the white, male, “first world” perspective has been privileged’.⁴⁰ As a corrective, liberation theology, feminist theology and black theology have developed. These do not seek to replace traditional theology, but to correct its bias. ‘At the moment we are experiencing a kind of Pentecost in Christian theology as various groups find their theological voices and reflect upon their faith from the perspective of their experience. Among these are lesbian and gay Christians, of

course.⁴¹ Stuart considers that although gay and lesbian Christians do not claim infallibility they deserve to be heard in the debate because all of us who feel able to proclaim ourselves joyfully lesbian and gay and Christian do so because we have been through intensive theological reflection.⁴²

Much of the difficulty we face in the present discussions on homosexuality is that heterosexual people find it hard to recognise that there is a different reality to their own. The insights of science and medicine demand that we recognise that both heterosexuality and homosexuality are both natural. And if natural, then we need to recognise that the humanity God created was not just male and female, black and white, but also heterosexual, gay and lesbian, intersex and transsexual too. Any theological and ethical debate must begin by acknowledging this and cease calling what God has created inferior, a handicap or, even worse, perverted. Gay and lesbian people have been telling us this, but we also have the evidence of science now to back their personal experience.

If we are to have an informed debate in the Church, certain things are essential. Firstly, we need to ensure that the accepted present scientific and medical view is recognised for what it is. The willingness of conservatives to find support for their views by using discredited scientific evidence or by quoting those who distort genuine research findings is all too common in some published literature. We need to ensure that mainstream scientific views are given proper recognition as such. In order to do this, the Church will need to seek input from the scientific and medical community. If the Lambeth Bishops could obtain as a speaker on International Debt the President of the World Bank, then surely they could equally enlist an authoritative speaker from, say the Royal College of Psychiatrists, who is an expert in the field of sexuality. Bishops are not experts in either economics or medicine and psychology and need to recognise their need of help in both these areas if they are to be enabled to carry out their teaching role. Those responsible for the preparation of the 2008 Lambeth Conference source material for the Bishops on Sexuality had made no contact with the Royal College of Psychiatrists until we urged them to contact a recent President, who is a practising Christian.

Secondly, it needs to be recognised that a fundamentalist approach to scripture is not acceptable in deciding other issues in the Church and should not be the approach when discussing homosexuality. If we discard fundamentalist views, the evidence against homosexuality is even less supportive of a conservative position than it is on other issues, e.g. remarriage after divorce, ordination of women, etc.

Thirdly, the debate can only take place when gay and lesbian people are full participants in the debate. We must, as a matter of urgency, look at ways in which they are enabled without fear to do this. The appointment of Gene Robinson, and attempted appointment of Jeffrey John, as bishops have often been described as ‘jumping the gun’ but if we look at the debate described in Acts 15, the main evidence produced was the results of the mission to the Gentiles. Paul and Peter did not wait until the Church had discussed and agreed the matter before proceeding. Indeed obedience to the Spirit demanded they went ahead and their obedience to the Spirit was the basis of the evidence they produced at the Jerusalem Synod. If we follow this pattern we will not

fear 'jumping the gun' - we have biblical precedence. If the 2004 Primates' Meeting had really wished to take the biblical evidence seriously, they would have been far more reticent to 'regret' the consecration of Gene Robinson in ECUSA and the blessing of same sex partnerships in the Canadian Church, and would see them as an opportunity to assess what seems good to the Spirit and the Church. Furthermore, to have included Gene Robinson as an official invitee at the Lambeth Conference in 2008 would have aided this and ensured that the 'listening process' promised in every Lambeth Conference resolution on Sexuality since 1978 actually happened.

Acts 15 also faces the Church with other challenges. The Jerusalem Synod concluded that it would not place a greater burden on Gentile converts than certain essentials. This might also be interpreted in the present context as not placing a greater burden on gay and lesbian men and women than is placed on heterosexuals in sexual relationships, i.e. faithfulness and mutual care. Christ upbraided the Pharisees and Scribes for placing a too heavy burden on their fellow men and women and doing nothing to help them. To force all gay people to be celibate is not a burden placed on all heterosexuals - it is either chosen or, for some, reluctantly forced on them. One gay man, who had lived such a celibate life in accord with Catholic teaching, struggled with this. He asked in a letter to the press why God would create homosexuals like himself with a strong life-long homosexual desire and at the same time forbid them to express it on pain of eternal damnation. He concludes that his nature is God given and that God is not a torturer. Sadly today, as in biblical times, human beings demand sacrifices of others they would not themselves be prepared to bear.

The Christian teaching also demands that we bear one another's burdens. All too often this is absent in the case of gay and lesbian people. How often do we hear of the Church's concern that gay men in particular may be targeted as victims of assault? Too often homophobic rhetoric in the Church gives solace to those who harm them. A book review in a parish magazine listed 'child abuse, torture, murder, lesbianism, drugs, Satanism, occult' as 'horrors' from which a young girl needed rescuing by God.

As was mentioned in an earlier section, the gay community has shown exemplary self giving in the care of others affected by HIV/AIDS but health workers found the churches very unwilling to become involved. When churches have given support their members may be apathetic or critical, e.g. a service in a University chaplaincy for all those affected by AIDS/HIV was welcomed by the gay community and well supported by a wide variety of people both inside and outside the University, but less well supported by Christians. 'It's nothing to do with us' remarked one student and a former member of staff objected vociferously every time AIDS was even mentioned in prayers. In 1999 the Church Times rightly reported the bombings by a mentally ill man in Brixton and Brick Lane on its front page but, despite the fact that his bombing of the gay pub in Soho had caused even more deaths and injury, this was ignored. Instead, the Church Times reported that conservative Anglican Primates wanted to continue to discriminate against gay people and also women. This lends support to those who find it acceptable to attack gay people and women.

In a more positive light was the statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 1979 Social Welfare Commission document: 'The

church has a serious responsibility to work for the elimination of any injustices perpetrated on homosexuals by society. As a group that has suffered more than its share of oppression and contempt, the homosexual community has particular claim upon the concern of the church.⁴³ *Something to Celebrate*, the Church of England report on the changing patterns of families in contemporary society, urged the churches to be less quick to turn discussion about families onto marriage and the ordering of sexuality and the concentration of the legal status of relationship and think more about 'the qualities of that relationship or the flourishing of the people within it.'⁴⁴ The report wished to reaffirm the biblical emphasis on relationships with God and each other: 'Relationships are good in so far as they express qualities of love, faithfulness, commitment and mutual responsibility. Equally, relationships which are casual, promiscuous, adulterous or exploitative have no place in promoting human well-being and cannot therefore be acceptable in whatever kind of family structure they are expressed or experienced.'⁴⁵ Christians are therefore called to encourage and support such relationships and churches are to welcome them. The relationships referred to include gay and lesbian couples.

In September 2009 the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends decided that they should treat same sex committed relationships in the same way as opposite sex marriages, reaffirming their central insight that marriage is the Lord's work and they are but witnesses. They do not plan to act contrary to the existing laws, but are to press the Government to make the necessary changes. They compare the decisions made with those made by a similar Yearly Meeting over 200 years ago, which led to the national campaign to abolish slavery. Hence they urge other church and faith communities to engage with them in exploring the issue. Their decision, like that against slavery, was reached not by seeking proof texts to either confirm or deny their leading but rather to seek to read Scripture in the Spirit that inspired it.⁴⁶ Are they once again leading the way as they led in the abolition of slavery and giving us a new vision?

The question for the Anglican Communion and the Church of England in particular is whether the cost of unity is to be borne by the gay and lesbian community. If this is the case, maybe the time has come for those who want an inclusive church to explore how this can become reality even if it involves a split. A conservative homophobic agenda prevents both the ministry to gay and lesbian people and denies the opportunity for such people to minister fully within God's Church. Above all let us recognise that it is God's church which welcomes all the people he created, whether they are gay or straight, transsexual or intersex. It is the ministry of Christ who welcomed all, especially those whom the religious treated as outsiders, and included them among the twelve apostles.

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