

Homosexuality and Scripture

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It must be granted that direct references to homosexual activity in the Bible are relatively few. However, these more explicit texts belong to a much broader biblical discourse on creation, love, holiness and human relationships - a discourse which goes to the heart of God's purpose for humankind and which, as I shall argue, flows in continuity with such texts rather than in discontinuity from them. I shall briefly outline the contours of this broader discourse first, and shall then move on to discuss those passages which refer more specifically to homosexual practice.

The early chapters of Genesis do not go into great detail about the distinctions between female and male - but they do emphasise that each was a separate, intentional creation, and that they were made distinct rather than 'two of the same'. It is these chapters which provide the basic context for human sexuality, procreation and marriage (Gen 1:27-8; 2:18-24). They are foundational for the classical Judaeo-Christian teaching that sexual intercourse is designed for expression solely within the life-long, marital relationship of a man and a woman.¹

Plainly, biblical models of sex, marriage and reproduction must be related in turn to the essential quality of love. The concept of love in the Bible extends far beyond sexual love. God's love defines our love, not *vice versa*: 'We love because he first loved us' (1 Jn. 4:19). God's creation of the human race extends this love outwards and opens the way to a covenant of mutual trust and care. When God sees that it is not good for Adam to be alone, he creates an 'other' - a woman - to be his companion (Gen. 2:20-5). The complementarity inherent in the resultant relationship is expressed at least partly as a physical complementarity: the two who are clearly distinct and different are nevertheless intended to become 'one flesh' (Gen. 2:24). As is well known, traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation has accorded this complementarity a unique and exclusive moral status: it has been taken to mean that Man and Woman are created anatomically for each other - and that since they correspond genitally and procreatively in a way that two men or two women cannot, homosexual activity lies *ipso facto* outside the realm of divine sanction.

This historic view of the creation narrative has, of course, been dismissed in much recent lesbian and gay liberationist theological writing as a 'naturalistic fallacy' - a leap of logic from 'what is' to 'what ought to be'; a flawed inference of exclusive divine intentions from particular biological consequences.² Rowan Williams even goes so far as to call this same inference 'nonscriptural', apparently on the basis that while Genesis 2 may *describe* a relational norm, it should not be read as *proscribing* all exceptions to that norm.³ Certainly, it needs to be recognised, quite apart from the current debate about homoerotic sexual practice, that heterosexual sex is *itself* hardly confined to penile-vaginal penetration and reproduction. Still, however, it would take an extraordinary evasion of the plain sense of

¹ For an exposition of this teaching tradition, see Schmidt, Thomas E., *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity on the Homosexuality Debate*, Leicester: IVP, 1995, pp.39-63.

² For a summary of this critique see Vasey, Michael, *Strangers and Friends*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, pp.49ff.

³ Williams, Rowan, 'The Body's Grace', in Eugene F. Rogers (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, p.320.

the biblical narrative on men, women and sex to suggest that the link between heterosexual activity and procreation is merely incidental. Granted, the vast majority of such activity is not finally procreative; granted, the advent of artificial contraception has made it even less so; granted, God gave us sex for pleasure, too; granted, large numbers of men and women, who for whatever reason cannot produce children, continue to enjoy intercourse. But there can be little doubt that Scripture takes the procreative *capacity* of heterosexual interaction *per se* to be a distinguishing mark of its explicit divine endorsement - something which validates it over against other, intrinsically non-reproductive modes of sexual relating (Gen. 1:28; 9:1-15; 15:1-21; Ps. 127:3).⁴

Admittedly, the complementarity of woman and man is more than simply physical. Genesis 1:27 emphasises that God created human beings in His own image - male and female together. The context shows that this divine image is expressed in a relationship which may be sexual, but which is also spiritual, emotional and psychological. Their being joined together in marriage becomes a fundamental expression of all this: 'So a man will leave his father and his mother and be united with his wife' (Gen 2:24). This becomes the definitive biblical paradigm for human sexual love. Granted, like everybody else, evangelicals need to remember that the application of this paradigm was not immediately confined to *monogamous* heterosexual marriage in the Old Testament; still, there can be little dispute that in biblical-theological terms heterosexual monogamy emerges from it teleologically, as its purposed end. Certainly, the Genesis creation narrative is later taken as the basis for monogamous heterosexual marriage by both Jesus and Paul (Matt. 19:4-6; Eph. 5:31).⁵ Moreover, it also serves as the ground of various laws and obligations designed to reinforce the singular validity and social status of such monogamy (Matt 19:4-12; 1 Cor. 7:1-40; Col. 3:18-19; Tit. 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; Heb. 13:4).

While so much current debate centres on sexual activity, we should be careful to reiterate the key place in God's purposes of other forms of non-erotic love - e.g. sisterly and brotherly love (*philadelphia*), and love expressed in friendship (*philia*). A classic biblical example which illustrates both is that of David and Jonathan. Nor should we forget that Jesus chose friends whom he regarded as 'family' (Mark 3:33-5). The closest of these were Peter, James and John, the latter of whom was distinguished as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 21:20). These examples confirm that we need not be fearful of same-sex friendships. They should also spur us to reject insinuations that such friendships must be homosexual in nature. It has become a staple of pro-gay exegesis, for example, to present David and Jonathan in homoerotic terms - despite the fact that the text offers no credible evidence of this.⁶

It is important to note in this context that many homosexual people, for Christian or other reasons, are committed to chastity - that is, to abstention from genital sex. In this, they

⁴ For an elaboration of this argument see my own essay, 'For the Procreation of Children', in Durber, Susan (ed.), *As Man and Woman Made: Theological Reflections on Marriage*, London: The United Reformed Church, 1994, pp.22-32.

⁵ Cf. Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, pp. 115-8.

⁶ 1 Sam. 18:1-2; 2 Sam 1:26. Cf. Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, pp.120-1, and Halperin, D., *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, London, Routledge, 1990, Ch.4. But even David Greenberg, who is usually more even-handed on such matters, resorts to speculating and arguing from silence on this point. He begins by admitting, 'In neither case does the text mention a sexual aspect to the relationship'. Yet then he goes on to surmise that 'an explicit homosexual relationship could easily have been deleted by priestly editors...' So, for that matter, could much else which we should like to be in Scripture, but which does not appear there! Greenberg, David F., *The Construction of Homosexuality*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp.113-4.

resemble many heterosexuals (whether single, divorced or widowed) who believe it right to refrain from sexual relations - however much they may long for the physical bond of marriage (cf. 1 Cor 7:11; 1 Tim. 5:9). In addition, of course, there are those of both orientations who have chosen the equally hard way of celibacy - that is, a lifelong, rather than a provisional, commitment to sexual abstinence. Not only did Jesus himself live a single, abstinent life; he seems to have recognised and commended others who observed this pattern, even making a distinction between those (probably impotent but possibly with a strong same-sex orientation), who had been 'born' to observe it, those (probably castrated courtiers, but possibly others) who had been 'made that way by people', and those called to renounce marriage 'because of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19: 12; cf. 1 Cor. 7:7). These points should not be lost as we approach those texts which deal more directly with homosexual activity.

In what follows, it will become clear that while a number of biblical passages bear on the debate about homosexual practice, it is those from the Pauline epistles which offer the clearest and most directly relevant guidance to us as we struggle to address this issue in the present-day Church. This balance of focus is very much reflected in the length and detail of my contributions on the various biblical texts which may be adduced in respect of homoerotic sexual activity.

Old Testament

Genesis 19:1-29.

The story of Lot and Sodom clearly entails a gross breach of hospitality. According to justice and tradition, the men of Sodom should have protected Lot's visitors (cf. Ezek. 16:49). Instead, however, they abused them. Lot is keen to act as an upright host towards those who are 'under his roof', and as such he reflects the typically high standards of hospitality which pertained in ancient near-eastern cultures. The men of Sodom, however, contravene those standards severely. Indeed, as the text suggests through its report that God aims to destroy the city (19:12-14), and as Jesus later confirms when he denounces Sodom in Matthew 10:14-15 and 11: 20-4, the men's actions constitute more than an isolated breach of domestic etiquette; they are, in fact, a manifestation of much deeper-seated sins of idolatry, pride and rebellion. These, rather than homosexuality *per se*, are undoubtedly the overriding themes of the passage. They cannot, however, mask the fact that the abuse in question does appear to have strongly sexual connotations.

Among others, Derrick Bailey, John Boswell and John McNeill have claimed that in verse 5 the verb *yāda*^c, which is usually translated 'know', means simply 'get acquainted with' rather than 'have sex with'.⁷ Admittedly, this verb is used in a sexual sense on just 15 other occasions out of 943 uses in the Hebrew Bible. Yet the context here is one in which Lot himself seems to have viewed the intentions of the men of Sodom as sexual, by offering them his daughters instead of guests whom he believes to be male (even though they turn out to be angels). The further detail that these daughters have not yet 'known' a man,

⁷ Bailey, Derrick Sherwin, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. London: Longman, 1955, pp.3-4; Boswell, John, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp.93-94; McNeill, John J., *The Church and the Homosexual*, Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1976, pp.54-55.

would seem to bear with it the strong contemporary cultural attractions of female virginity to a sexually mature male. Moreover, there are compelling semantic and narrative parallels between this account and that of the rape of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19:22,25, which quite explicitly uses the verb 'know' in a sexual way.⁸

From a Christian point of view, it is also relevant that in the New Testament, both Peter (2 Pet. 2:10) and Jude (7) seem to regard Sodom's sin as at least partly to do with disordered sexual behaviour. Peter presents God's punishment of Sodom as a salutary reminder of God's impending judgement on the unrighteous - especially those who, like the men in Genesis 19, 'indulge their flesh in depraved lust'. Likewise, Jude casts the same 'sexual immorality' and 'unnatural lust' as 'an example' of sin prone to merit the 'punishment of eternal fire'. As Robert Gagnon points out in his exhaustive study of this and other relevant texts on sexual immorality, it is noteworthy that Peter and Jude highlight the sin of lust here, rather than any failure to provide social justice or hospitality.⁹

Having said all this, it must be stressed that the intended sexual act in this passage is actually one of gang rape, which, as in the parallel incident at Gibeah in Judges 19, renders it less specifically relevant to the headline, present day theological issue of non-violent, consenting homosexual practice. For an Old Testament source which might apply more specifically to this, we must turn to Leviticus.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

These verses could conceivably refer to cult prostitution, and would thus not be pertinent today. But the orientation of both chapters 18 and 20 is against *all* forms of ungodly sexual behaviour - incest, adultery and bestiality as well as homosexual practice. All such activities are viewed as a threat to marriage and the family, each of which plays a pivotal role in Hebrew culture and religion. They are deemed wrong not simply because pagan Caananites indulged in them, but because God has pronounced them wrong as such.

It is significant that when Lev. 18:22 declares 'You shall not lie with a male', it would seem to prohibit men from taking the 'active' role in homosexual intercourse, even though this was deemed to be comparatively respectable in several contemporary cultures, as compared to the effeminate 'passive' role. The same root text also deploys the generic term 'male' rather than any more specific word for 'man' or 'youth' - a detail which also points to a more comprehensive understanding of homoerotic activity. Furthermore, the death penalty in Leviticus 20:13 applies equally to the active and the passive partner: there is no implication of rape, in which case the rapist alone would have been executed (cf. Deut. 22:22-5). Nor is there any hint of coercion. The context, rather, would seem to include homosexual intercourse by mutual consent. Comparative literary study has revealed that the Assyrians outlawed forcible same-sex intercourse; it has also shown that the Egyptians banned pederasty; Israel, however, appears to have stood alone in viewing homosexual acts *in general* with this degree of severity.¹⁰

⁸ For more detail on all this, see Gagnon, Robert A.J., *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, pp.71-78.

⁹ Gagnon, Robert A.J., *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, p.88.

¹⁰ These points are based on Wright, David F. 'Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The meaning of arsenokoitai (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10), *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984), pp. 125-53, Wenham, Gordon, 'Homosexuality in the

Gospels

Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21.

It is often pointed out by apologists for lesbian and gay sexual relationships that Jesus himself does not pronounce explicitly on homosexual practice. Yet arguments from silence are notoriously suspect in theology, and Jesus hardly commented in direct terms on every ethical issue under the sun: slavery and capital punishment, for instance, are not matters on which he taught explicitly. Having said this, his condemnations of *porneia* or 'sexual immorality' in Matt 15:19 and Mark 7:21 would almost definitely have been meant, and been taken, to include homoerotic sexual activity. Certainly, as Michael Saltlow has shown, such activity was typically condemned by the rabbis of the time whenever they considered it.¹¹ Having said this, at least following the exile, there is very little evidence of, or extant comment on, such activity among Jewish men¹² - so Jesus' not mentioning it in specific terms is hardly surprising.

Epistles

Romans 1:18-32

This is by some distance the most important biblical reference for the homosexuality debate. As such, I shall deal with it in considerably more depth than the other passages being considered here. It is important, first and foremost, because it provides by far the fullest *theological* reflection on same-sex sexual relations in the biblical canon. It is also significant for being almost certainly the only reference in Scripture to lesbian sexual activity - something which contemporary Graeco-Roman sources hardly ever mentioned in the same breath as male homosexual practice.¹³

After an opening salutation and prayer (vv.1-15), Paul begins to establish the context for what he will go on to teach about homosexual behaviour. First, he affirms that the gospel is for both Jew and Greek alike (v.17). This is fundamental for a Roman congregation which appears to contain members from both communities (1:13, cf. 4:1; chs. 9-11). More specifically, it underlines the equal status of Hebrew and Gentile Christians with respect to salvation (v.16), while at the same time implying their equality with respect to divine 'wrath' (v.18) and 'judgement' (2:3). On both counts, there is a *universality* in Christian experience: the righteousness of God is available to *everyone* who has faith (v.17), but by the same token, *all* who spurn God's benefits are subject to what Paul later calls God's 'righteous condemnation' (2:5). Indeed, as the apostle sums it up, 'God

Bible', in Higton, Tony (ed.) *Sexuality and the Church*. Hawkwell: ABWON, 1987, and Hays, Richard B., *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, pp.382-3.

¹¹ Saltlow, Michael L., *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality*. Atlanta, Georgia:

Scholars Press, 1995. Brown Judaic Studies, No. 303.

¹² Huggins, K.W., 'An Investigation into the Jewish Theology of Sexuality Influencing the References to Homosexuality in Romans 1:18-32'. Ph.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986.

¹³ There are very marginal readings which deny that Paul is referring to lesbian activity. These are discussed below. For contemporary Graeco-Roman references to lesbianism see Brooten, B., 'Patristic Interpretations of Rom 1:26'. Paper delivered at the Ninth International Conference on Patristic studies, Oxford, nd.

shows no partiality' (2:11). It is crucial to realise that this impartiality applies just as much to the 'wickedness' of v.18 as to the 'righteousness' of v.17.

This avowedly comprehensive, non-partisan soteriology frames the ethical analysis developed by Paul in vv.18-32. Here, we learn that the global scope of salvation history has been made manifest not only in 'the gospel of God's Son' (cf. v.9), but also in the very 'creation of the world' (v.20). Some commentators (notably William Countryman) have suggested that Paul in these verses is rehearsing a stereotypically self-righteous Judaic account of Gentile depravity, precisely in order to debunk that same account in 2:1ff, where Old Covenant notions of 'impurity' are (supposedly) contrasted with genuine sins, and where homosexual 'impurity' is shown to be no more threatening to Christ's New Covenant order than the consumption of pork.¹⁴ This 'set up' is inferred from an apparent switch to 'us and them' rhetoric, as denoted by the third person plural personal pronouns of vv.18ff. ('they', 'their' etc.). While such a reading is just about conceivable, we should be careful not to dismiss the various definitions of 'wickedness' cited in vv.21-31 simply on the grounds that those who apply such definitions happen in *this* case to be smug and sanctimonious. Indeed, the fact that Paul declares such hypocrites to be guilty of 'the very same things' (*gar auta*, 2:1) as the sinners they attack only confirms that those 'same things' are nonetheless to be viewed as *consistently* and *intrinsically* wrong. As Thomas Schmidt has put it, our exegesis here must not throw out 'the baby of righteousness with the bath water of self-righteousness'¹⁵. Besides, Countryman's tortuous attempt to recast the vocabulary of Chapter 1 wholly in terms of a superseded Levitical holiness code hardly reflects Paul's more complex handling of the Law in the rest of the letter (cf. 3:19; 7:7-25; 7:28 etc.), and, as Schmidt shows, would collapse immediately if only *one term* in vv.24-8 did actually connect with 'sin', rather than mere ritual purity.

But what precisely are the 'things' which Paul has in mind - the things which violate God's creation order and thereby undermine righteousness? In general terms, we may say that they go under the heading of that 'godlessness' (*asebeian*) to which he refers in verse 18. More specifically, they are exemplified first by what might be called the *apathetic neglect* of God - a failure to honour his purpose as revealed in the world. This, says Paul, leads to a numbing of the spirit and a dulling of the mind (v.21-2). Beyond such plain 'lukewarmness', however, lurks the more active and more sinister threat of *idolatry*. Above all else, it is this that provides the key to interpretation of verses 26 and 27...

In v.23, Paul presents the first of three vital 'exchanges'. He states here that the wicked characteristically 'changed (*ēllaxan*) the glory of the immortal God into images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles'. One thinks readily of the Israelites' golden calf (Ex. 32) and the Ephesians' shrines to Artemis (Acts 19:26). Obviously, the Second of the Ten Commandments - that prohibiting on 'graven images' - looms large here (Ex. 20:4). However, Paul quickly broadens his conception of idolatry to take in the First Commandment, too: 'they exchanged (*ēllaxan*) the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator' (v.25 NRSV, cf. Ex 20:1-3).

Vitality for our concerns, it is this more general conception of idolatry which prompts Paul to cast homosexual practice against the backdrop not only of Mosaic law, but also of

¹⁴ E.g. Edwards, G.A., *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective*. New York: Pilgrim, 1984, pp. 85-102; Countryman, L. William, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988, pp. 98-123.

¹⁵ Schmidt, T.E., *Straight and Narrow*. Leicester: IVP, p.66.

'natural' law - that is, not only in relation to Exodus 20, but also in relation to Genesis 1-2, with its picture of humankind made 'male and female' in God's image, and its portrayal of their complementarity as 'one flesh' (1:27; 2:24). Granted, John Boswell may have been right to note that no full-blown juridical system of 'natural laws' was institutionalised in human society until 'more than a millennium after Paul's death'¹⁶, but the absence of such a system does not in itself denote the absence of any natural *theology*, or any ethic based on 'general revelation', and it is these to which Paul is clearly appealing here.

I have already emphasised the centrality of God's creation design in Paul's thinking (v.20). Indeed, it is probably significant that the idolatrous exchange of creature and Creator in v.25 here is described literally not just as a lie, but as *the lie* (*tō pseudei*) - *the* defining distortion or 'perversion' of God's purpose for the world, from which other distortions and perversions must inevitably follow (cf. Gen. 3:5).¹⁷ It is as archetypes of such 'consequential' distortions and perversions that we must approach the bodily 'degradations' (*atimadzesthai ta sōmata*) described generically in v.24, and illustrated specifically in relation to same-sex intercourse in vv.26-7. No doubt, such degradations belong to a much broader catalogue of evils - not least those listed by Paul in v.29ff. as including covetousness, malice, jealousy and the like. Even so, within the structure of his argument it is clear that such bodily degradations are marked out for special attention because they constitute a *particularly* vivid paradigm of 'creation gone wrong'.

Although we may assume from v.24 that Paul is thinking of heterosexual as well as homosexual depravities, the third 'exchange' in vv.26-7 suggests that Paul sees homoerotic activity as almost iconic of what he is condemning. Richard B. Hays bears this out vividly when he writes of homosexual behaviour being for Paul 'a sacrament (so to speak) of the antireligion of human beings who refuse to honour God as Creator. When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator's design.'¹⁸

From what has been said so far, it can be seen that a creation-theological reading of verses 26-7 derives from the *broad contours* of Paul's discourse, and not, as is often alleged by 'pro-gay' apologists like Victor Paul Furnish and Michael Vasey, from a dogmatic eisegesis of the single words 'nature' and 'natural' (*phusin, phusikēn*) in vv.26-7.¹⁹ No doubt, these particular terms do carry other meanings in Scripture, sometimes culturally-specific (as in 1 Cor. 11:14), and sometimes even negative (Eph.2:3). But given the pervasiveness of Paul's wider 'argument from design' here, it would take a quite extreme form of special pleading to divorce *phusin* from the apostle's understanding of God's eternal intent for humans (cf. v.20). Besides, the notion of homosexual practice as *para phusin* and thus immoral, is found in several contemporary Graeco-Roman sources, and especially in that Hellenistic Jewish tradition with which Paul himself was associated.²⁰

¹⁶ Boswell, John, *Christainity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.110. This is the main pretext on which Boswell argues that Paul is only condemning certain forms of same-sex sexual activity, rather than working from universal or 'natural' principles to condemn it all. Specifically, he concludes that 'Paul did not discuss gay *persons*, but only homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons'. (p.109).

¹⁷ Harrison, E.F., *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976, p.25.

¹⁸ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p.386.

¹⁹ Furnish, V.P. 'Homosexuality and the Bible: Reading the Texts in Context' in Siker, J. (ed.), *Homosexuality and the Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994, p. 30; Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, p.131-2.

²⁰ For pertinent references see Dunn, James D.G., *Romans 1-8*. Dallas: Word, p.65.

In the midst of all this, we should not lose sight of a somewhat surprising theodical ‘twist’ in Paul’s reasoning, *viz.* the identification of God as actively ‘giving people up’ to the lusts of their hearts. This concept is mediated no fewer than three times by the use of the verb *parēdōken* (vv.24, 26, 28), and implies that sexual perversion has about it an innate, and even unconscious, compulsiveness - a compulsiveness which, after a time, hardens itself even against the will of the Creator. In such circumstances, Paul envisages what Mark Bonnington and Bob Fyall describe as a ‘terrible divine “hands off”’, or what Hays sees as the ‘irony of sin [playing] itself out’ - an irony in which the creature’s original instinct for glorification is wrathfully loosed by the Creator into doomed self-destruction.²¹ In this way we realise that the sexual misconduct abhorred by Paul is in a very real sense the *result* of divine judgement rather than the *cause* of it. The homosexual practice abhorred by the Apostle is therefore as much to be regretted as castigated: it is a presenting symptom of a world estranged from its Maker. As such, it is mark of that universal ‘fallenness’ in which we all share, and should not be singled out for particular scorn, even while it cannot be condoned. This point is made explicit by Paul in 2:1ff..

Discerning the theological superstructure of Rom1-2 as we have done is a necessary prelude to closer semantic analysis of verses 26-7 themselves. Few serious scholars doubt that when Paul here condemns the use of human bodies ‘against nature’ (*para phusin*), he has in mind sexual acts performed by men with men, and by women with women. Admittedly, Derek Sherwin Bailey and Vern Bullough have suggested that since Paul insisted elsewhere that women subordinate themselves to men (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:8; Tit. 2:5), he could be referring to women who adopt the dominant position in heterosexual intercourse, rather than to lesbian sex *per se*²². Conversely, it is just about imaginable that the ‘unnatural use’ of women’s bodies which Paul has in mind is their indulgence in anal sex with men. Both interpretations are, however, unlikely. The second ignores the clear rhetorical and grammatical parallels which the apostle is drawing between women and men, the latter of whom are explicitly said to have abandoned heterosexual practices (*krēsin tēs thleias*) for homosexual ones (*orexei autōn eis allēlous*). Moreover, both this and the first reading disregard the universal sweep of Paul’s natural theology, focused as it is on sexual relations as such, rather than on specific sexual techniques. Indeed, the fact that Paul uses the more generalised vocabulary of ‘male’ and ‘female’ here (*arsenes; thēleias*), rather than the terminology of ‘men’ or ‘women’ (*gunē; anēr*), may well bear this out.²³

Given that Paul is concerned to categorise homoerotic sexual practice as a ‘shameless’ activity (*askēmosunēn katērgadzomenōi*), the next question to be asked is whether that category should be taken to include *all* forms of physical relationship between people of the same gender. Those who seek to argue against such a ‘blanket’ condemnation usually do so on the premise that the homosexuality to which Paul is referring here is in some way distinct from the sort of ‘faithful, stable, loving’ same-sex partnerships which many would now commend as authentically Christian.

²¹ Bonnington, Mark & Fyall, Bob, *Homosexuality and the Bible*. Cambridge: Grove Books, p.20; Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p.386.

²² Bailey, Derrick Sherwin, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. London: Longman, 1955, p.40; Bullough, Vern., *Sexual Variance in Society and History*. New York: Wiley, p.180.

²³ A point made by Cranfield, C.E.B., *Romans I-VIII*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, p.125 and Morris, Leon, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995, p.92.

One suggestion, mooted by Furnish and others, is that Paul is in fact describing a quite particular form of pagan temple prostitution.²⁴ This, they argue, would hardly equate with the lifestyle of modern gays and lesbians. Certainly, Paul would have known about the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth (the city from which Romans was probably written), with its thousand priestesses and 'sacred slaves' known colloquially as 'the sailors' delight'.²⁵ But as even Boswell admits, this explanation falters as soon as one realises that the parties involved in the sexual activities defined by Paul are 'burning with lust' for *one another* (v.27) - a description unlikely to fit the more dispassionate prostitution associated with such religious ceremony and ritual.²⁶

Another increasingly familiar interpretation holds that Paul is concerned here primarily with pederasty - a practice restricted to the upper echelons of society and indulged in by basically heterosexual males. This was indeed the most common manifestation of homosexual practice in ancient Greece, but it was by no means the *only* recognised form of same-sex relationship. For example, the 'Sacred Band' of Thebes institutionalised the pairing of soldiers as lovers to foster their courage in battle, as they fought to the death for their 'faithful, stable, loving' partner. A similar arrangement pertained in Sparta, while longer-term homosexual partnerships were accepted in Elis and Boeotia.²⁷ Granted, these partnerships were often maintained side-by-side with heterosexual marriage, but it is not even true, as many gay and lesbian exegetes claim, that the Greeks and Romans had no recognition of what we would now call 'homosexual orientation'. The extensive researches of Kenneth Dover in this area in fact reveal a much more complex situation than many appreciate²⁸. Notwithstanding all that has since been discovered in genetics and biology, the Anglican Bishops' report *Issues in Human Sexuality* rightly concludes on this basis that the world of the New Testament *did* in some cases recognise phenomena 'which today would be interpreted in terms of orientation'.²⁹

We cannot, of course, know for certain the full range of homosexual relationships and practices with which Paul was familiar. His virtually unprecedented yoking of lesbianism with male homosexuality does, however, suggest that his perspective is unusually broad for his time. It certainly rules out the restriction of his words to pederasty alone. Nor is it likely that as an educated Pharisee, he would have been ignorant of the subtle ethical reasoning of Plato, Aristotle and numerous other ancient philosophers, who had condemned homoerotic sexual practice while nonetheless venerating same-sex friendships. Indeed, when linked with all that we have said about the universality of Paul's vision of divine salvation and divine judgement, and when placed in the context of his cosmic creation-theology, these points compel the conclusion that the most authentic reading of Rom 1:26-7 is that which sees it prohibiting homosexual activity in the most general of terms, rather than in respect of more culturally and historically specific forms of such activity.

²⁴ Furnish, V.P. 'The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context', in Siker, J. (ed.), *Homosexuality in the Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

²⁵ Caragounis, C.C., 'The Biblical Attitude to Homosexuality against its Ancient Background', *Vox Evangelica*, XXVII, 1997, p.38.

²⁶ Boswell, *Christainity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 108.

²⁷ Caragounis, C.C., 'The Biblical Attitude to Homosexuality against its Ancient Background', *Vox Evangelica*, XXVII, 1997, p.35.

²⁸ Dover, K.,J., *Greek Homosexuality*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978.

²⁹ London: Church House Publishing, 1991, p.12.

1 Timothy 1:8-11 (and 1 Corinthians 6:9)

Our consideration of Romans 1 confirms that crude law-grace dichotomies are hardly commensurate with Pauline teaching. This point is also borne out by 1 Timothy 1:8-11. Indeed, the need to integrate legal/doctrinal rectitude ('the law is good', v.8) with 'love that comes from a pure heart, conscience, and sincere faith' (v.6) is the keynote of this passage.

Paul is apparently dealing on one flank here with fanciful Gnostic speculations about the Hebrew Scriptures - particularly those practised by sects (like the Ophites) who mythologised and allegorised the genealogies of the Pentateuch (v.4)³⁰. Such speculations are criticised by Paul precisely because they are not 'legal' enough - i.e. they focus on religious marginalia rather than on the heart of the law (v.7). On another flank, Paul is faced with more routine contraventions of 'sound doctrine', and it is as part of his list of those who commit such contraventions in vv. 9-10 that we encounter the word *arsenokoitais*- a word which appears also in a similar Pauline list of vices at 1 Corinthians 6:9.³¹

Most translations and commentaries associate *arsenokoitais* in some way or other with practitioners of homoerotic acts. G.W. Knight suggests very plausibly that the sins catalogued by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:9-10 are cast as 'a deliberate echo of the order of the second part of the Decalogue'.³² Hence, after the ultimate dishonouring of parents in matricide and patricide, and after murder in general, Paul can be seen to focus on those who undermine the seventh commandment as 'fornicators' (*pornois*) and *arsenokoitais*. In this way, both homosexual *and* heterosexual dimensions of sexual immorality are dealt with, and *both* are seen as undermining the sanctity of marriage.

But what of the word *arsenokoitais* itself? At first sight, precise interpretation appears difficult, since there is no record of its use in pre-Christian literature. Yet it is a compound of two terms which in their own right carried familiar sexual connotations. *arsēn* was a specific word for male, but was often used in connection with male sexuality. *koitēs* usually meant 'bed', but functioned as a widespread euphemism for sexual intercourse (cf. our term *coitus*).³³ Paul's yoking of the two therefore points strongly to a homoerotic denotation.

Of course, this still leaves us with the same problem we faced with Romans 1:26-7 - namely, what *kinds* of homosexual practice are in view? As with that text, John Boswell, Michael Vasey and others argue for a restriction of Paul's thinking only to the dominant Graeco-Roman models of pederasty, male cultic prostitution and slavery.³⁴ But this reading ignores the crucial context of 'the law', and the probable origin of the compound in question within the Torah.

arsenokoitais seems most probably to have been coined by Paul in response to the vocabulary of the Septuagint version of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, where its constituent terms appear as a translation of the Hebrew *mishkav zakur* ('lying with a male') - a

³⁰ Kelly, J.N.D., *The Pastoral Epistles*. London: A. & C. Black, pp.44-5.

³¹ Similar 'vice lists' appear at Rom. 1:29-31; 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:10,11; 6:9-10; 2 Cor. 12:20-1; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:31; 5:3-5; Col. 3:5-8; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; Tit. 3:3.

³² Knight, G.W. III, *The Pastoral Epistles*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992, p.85.

³³ Knight, G.W. III, *The Pastoral Epistles*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992, p. 85-6.

³⁴ Vasey, M., *Strangers and Friends*. pp. 135-7. See also Boswell, *Christianity*, p. 107-9.

phrase which rabbinical texts routinely take to refer to homosexual intercourse.³⁵ As we noted above, the purview of Leviticus 18 and 20 is remarkably comprehensive: it takes in a *whole range* of sexual sins, including incest, adultery and bestiality - and it does not appear to make any moral differentiation between 'active' and 'passive' homosexual activity, as the law-codes of other contemporary societies did. It is also worth reiterating that in drawing on these sources, Paul is echoing a preference for the generic term 'male', rather than any more particular word for 'man' or 'youth'. It is significant, too, that the death penalty in Leviticus 20:13 applies indiscriminately to the active and the passive partner, and that there is no implication of rape, since the rapist alone would then have been executed (cf. Deut. 22:22-5). Given that Leviticus 18 and 20 are the most logical source for Paul's thinking here, it therefore seems most unlikely that his reference would be as restricted as Vasey and Boswell suggest.

Importantly for current debate, the context of Paul's remarks in both 1 Timothy 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 is eligibility for God's kingdom in general, and for church membership in particular. As in Romans 1, homoerotic sexual practice here belongs to a catalogue of sins: it is apparently no better, and no worse, than fornication, adultery, theft, greed, drunkenness, slander and robbery. This surely confirms that the Church is a community of sinners, and disallows the singling out of homosexual sin for special condemnation. It also incidentally suggests that early church congregations contained homosexual people. Indeed, some of these may still have been sexually active. The clear teaching of Paul, however, is that continuing attachment to this, as to the other sinful practices he mentions, is incompatible with authentic participation in the community of God's people: 'And that is what some of you *were*: but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Cor. 6:11, my emphasis). In this, as we have seen, Paul is nothing less than consistent with the witness of Scripture as a whole.

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³⁵ Typical, for example, is Josephus (*Against Apion* 2:24; 199): 'The law recognises no sexual connections, except the natural union of man and wife...Sodomy it abhors, and punishes any guilt of such assault with death'.