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Blog article <http://arestlessfaith.com.au/blog/homosexuality-the-new-testament-and-today/>

December 3, 2012

Homosexuality, the New Testament and Today

During the last couple of weeks, I have been hearing & reading stories - stories both similar and different to my own; different because the people I've been listening to, or reading about, appear to be wired differently to me - sexually. Unlike me, they discovered (mostly in adolescence) that they were attracted to people of their own gender.

Let me share with you just one of those stories. It is the story of a devoutly Christian man who grew up in the 50s and 60s in the Deep South of the US - in what we would describe as a fundamentalist church.

He was a bright young man - and always shone in Sunday school. He was the pride and joy of his mum and dad. He still is. He was remarkably talented and a fervent disciple of Jesus. He still is. But when he went through that sometimes scary transition called puberty, he discovered to his growing alarm that the suddenly aroused attraction of his peers towards members of the opposite sex was matched by no such attraction in him.

And so he *pretended* he was interested - in that way. He knew to keep his mouth closed - about what he was fast learning about himself: that he was different - in ways he knew his church disapproved of. He knew his Bible well enough to know of its apparent condemnation of homosexuality!

When, years later, he asked his fiancé to marry him, he was quite up-front with her about his fears that despite the therapy he had sought and gone through, despite the fervent prayers that God would heal him - he was scared he would still struggle in marriage with the demons of this unwelcome affliction. And yet he did marry - to a woman he loved deeply as a friend and soul-mate, who loved him deeply - and who walked with him at every step of the way as he realized his extraordinary potential as a minister of the gospel.

His journey has been quite unlike mine - sexually - but in other ways very much like mine, because his experience brought him face to face with passages like Romans 1, which we are going to look at this morning, that appear to be entirely condemning of same-sex behaviour ... and even of same-sex desire ... and had him wondering whether there might be another way of understanding these things. That is what we have been doing, last week and this week.

Today we conclude our two-part series on homosexuality and the Bible. Last week, we concentrated on two verses from the Old Testament book of Leviticus - two of just 3 (or 4) directly relevant passages in the Old Testament.

This morning, I will concentrate on Romans 1, which is one of just three passages directly relevant in the New Testament. Romans 1 is a crucial passage for our purposes for a number of reasons:

Firstly, it is in the New Testament, which for Christians is likely to have more weight because, as we saw last week, lots of Old Testament laws and expectations are set aside as no longer relevant or important (not eating prawns or pork, for example, or the Sabbath laws).

Secondly, Romans 1 is the only passage in all of the Bible that appears to supply some reasons (some rationale) for the Levitical prohibition of same-gender sex. The other two New Testament references (in I Corinthians and 1 Timothy[1]) simply identify some forms of behaviour as morally unacceptable. There is no reason given for those prohibitions.

Thirdly, Romans 1 contains the only reference to female to female sexual behaviour - all other references are to men.

Fourthly, this passage is crucially relevant because, in some ways, it is so irrelevant. When you look closely, it doesn't seem to be talking about homosexuality at all, or, if at all, only at the level of behaviour. It does not appear to be speaking to (or about) the experiences of those people whose stories I have been hearing & reading about in the last few weeks. Let me explain.

Paul argues, in Romans 1 from verse 18, that human beings, although they know God, or at least have some awareness of God, suppress that knowledge; human beings in general do this, and have always done so. And this knowing ignorance of God manifests itself in idolatry, in human beings creating idols - basically to allow themselves to do what they want. Idolatry leads to immorality of all sorts.

This is where the discussion of sex comes in. Idolatry opens the floodgates to sexual immorality in all of its perverse varieties. 'Floodgates' is a good analogy because God allows it, according to Paul. He opens those flood-gates as his way of punishing foolish people for exchanging the truth about God for lies.

Verse 24:

'Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!'

It is here that Paul introduces same-gender sexual activity:

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

This passage from Romans has been used for centuries as the major basis for Christian condemnation of homosexual behaviour - men having sex with men; women engaging in sexual behaviour with women. But what makes this passage so apparently irrelevant for our purposes, is that it doesn't seem to line up with our fast evolving understandings of homosexuality as a disposition or as a state of being.

Paul is here talking about choices; the choice to ignore God; the choice to create idols in God's place; the choice to engage in degrading and unnatural sexual behaviour. This is a moral slippery-slope Paul is talking about - a process of degradation initiated by human choices.

But we now have every good reason to believe that homosexuality (as a disposition) is not a choice. It is, in fact, something that people would often prefer to un-choose if they could, at least up until recently. People of any disposition may choose to engage in homosexual behaviour, but as an orientation it is not something people choose.[2]

This understanding of homosexuality is now widely accepted - even among Christians. A friend of mine sent me a book of his about sex - written from a quite conservative point of view - and this author happily acknowledged this growing consensus that this orientation is not a choice.

Nor is it something one can give up - or repent of. For years, psychologists and counsellors have offered therapy - to cure people of their homosexuality. There have been all manner of ex-gay ministries set up; some of which still operate here in Sydney - mostly run by Christians these days, it seems, because the wider medical and psychological fraternity no longer sees homosexuality as something that needs to be cured.[3]

Increasingly, people who have been involved in these ex-gay ministries are admitting, publicly and regretfully, that these therapies don't work,[4] and often cause more harm than good. I was told during the week that Hillsong, here in Sydney, no longer recommends reparative treatment.

So how does this influence our reading of Romans 1 which does seem to be talking about something that could be cured; through repentance, faith and the help of the Holy Spirit?

Something that is truly a choice can be un-chosen - and so you can understand the incredible angst created by these verses for people like the man I was speaking about at the beginning of the sermon - let's call him 'Jack.' For person after person I have gotten to know, the discovery of their orientation was in the context of faithful and committed belief in God and Jesus; and so disturbed were they by this discovery that they had often gone to extreme lengths to change their hearts and minds and desires ... because of their belief in God and the Bible!

Theirs wasn't a turning away from God - but to God in often desperate attempts to reach out to God in the face of what, for many, ends up being suicidal despair.

SO what did Paul mean? How can we make sense of this fact that Paul appears to be speaking past (or around) our understanding & experience of homosexuality?

I think the explanation is pretty straightforward. There are 2 related likely reasons for Paul's condemnation of same-gender sex - that will help us resolve this cognitive dissonance.

The **first** is that Paul believed, in our terms, that people (all people) are naturally heterosexual and therefore are choosing to engage in same-gender sex perversely. Paul didn't have the benefit of the distinctions we now make between heterosexual and homosexual,[5] and so to even talk in these terms is somewhat anachronistic. But reading these verses does suggest that Paul saw this behaviour as essentially corrupt - and as he looked around the Roman world, he would have seen all sorts of examples that would have confirmed him in this view.

He would have known about drinking parties, called symposia, where male and female slaves were brought in as part of the entertainment offered. He would have known of the frequent sexual abuse of girls and boys in the households of Roman citizens, of the trade in young boys who were captured, imported, sold and then prostituted into sexual slavery. He would have known how acceptable it was in Greek and Roman society for a man to have sex with a woman, and then, for variety, to have a younger man to take the role of a woman for him.

And, as a first century Jew, Paul would have seen all this as corrupt and corrupting - as I think we would too, and especially corrupt on the assumption that all people are, by nature heterosexual, which leads on to a **second** (and related) reason for Paul's condemnation of same-gender sex, and that is that it was 'unnatural'. Notice Paul's words in verses 26 & 27:

'Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another.'

In describing same-gender sex as unnatural, Paul had some influential allies within Greek and Roman intellectual circles. Plato, for example, described male to male and female to female sexual relations as 'contrary to nature'.^[6]

Scholars have pointed out that much of this material from Romans 1 reflects (sometimes word for word) the writings of contemporary Stoic philosophers including Seneca who believed that an understanding of nature was the key to ethics; and that if something was contrary to nature it was wrong.^[7]

But for Paul, I think we can safely say, much more influential than contemporary ethical writings, was his knowledge of, and commitment to, the words of Leviticus, chapters 18 and 20 that we looked at last week. Paul understood from his Hebrew Scriptures that God, in creating the world, separated things into kinds that need to remain separate and distinct. He separated male from female, giving to each a distinctive and complementary role, both socially and sexually.

The gender divide is woven into the very fabric of nature, according to Paul's likely understanding, and so any confusion of this order is a violation of God's creative intentions. And it is also likely to have adverse personal and social implications ... the demeaning of men for example. Paul would have shared his culture's aversion for a type of sex that was not only destructive, but also often violent and abusive - which it certainly was in Greek and Roman society.

SO, that is what Paul is likely to have thought about same-gender sex. It makes sense! It makes sense of what he writes. It makes sense of his experience.

But it still leaves us with our problem that what Paul wrote doesn't quite make sense of our experience and new understandings.

We now know things about same-gender sexual orientation (and practice) that Paul simply would not have understood. How could he? We are only just coming to understand these things ourselves!

Which again raises the really important question: do these new understandings make a difference, or, more broadly still, are we at liberty to modify our understanding of things we read in the Bible on the basis of new knowledge?

I think we can and must, and are not prevented from doing this because the Bible itself engages in this process, as has the church over the years.

That is what I was trying to argue in my Sydney Morning Herald piece where I pointed out that the Christian church, in most of its varieties at least, has long since adjusted to scientific advances in areas of geology, biology and physics. We have very good reason to question the facticity of the Noah Flood story, for example, and I suggested we might need to do the same thing with homosexuality.

Not everyone was persuaded by this argument (as you might know)! A friend of mine rang me up the other day and asked me, 'Keith, tell me again the link between Noah's Flood and homosexuality.'

There are some obvious links, actually, with some serious category violations involved in the lead up to the Flood - humans having sex with angels and producing giants, to be precise! But the hermeneutical link is this: just as we don't now accept a Biblical cosmology (or cosmologies) in matters of geology and astrophysics, we also have reason to question Biblical cosmology in the area of what is considered 'natural' and 'unnatural.' This matter of what is 'natural' and 'unnatural' is also an aspect of cosmology; it is how we understand nature.

There has been a shift, and we have all been part of it. And it has happened fast, as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex people have mustered the courage to tell their stories - people who are our brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters; between 3 and 6% of our population (maybe more); as many as three times as many people than are red-headed; about 1 in 20 people you walk past in the street or work with every day ... are gay or lesbian or bi-sexual or transgender or intersex.

We now know that for most people this is not the result of choosing idolatry over God - though promiscuous and disordered sexuality could well be, and sometimes is ... though we also now have the tragic phenomena of GLBTI people walking away from churches (or never wanting to enter one) - because of the misunderstanding and hatred (sometimes) they experience there - of people who because of that rejection and pain, feel they have no choice but to throw in their faith altogether!

That is not Paul's fault - it is our fault as Christians - for our lack of love; our lack of effort to understand; our lack of courage to stand by and with our brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters who are not heterosexual; for clinging unreasonably, maybe, to theologies and ways of reading the Bible that don't work.[8] We have some repenting to do - that is for sure! And we certainly have the capacity for that!

What is the way forward here?

We do all need to think this through; to not just accept what I am saying, but to go away and think and pray about it - to do some research and talk to some people - especially those most vitally concerned. We might, after all of our thinking and praying, still think that the right thing to do if we are gay or lesbian or bisexual is to not ever have sex.

Henry Nouwen was a gay man who decided (on the basis of his understanding of Scripture) that he needed to remain celibate, and he was fully aware of the cost. He wrote this about sexual intimacy and our longing for it:

‘Our sexuality reveals to us our enormous yearning for communion. The desires of our body - to be touched, embraced and safely held - belong to the deepest longings of the heart, and are very concrete signs of our search for oneness.’[9]

He felt he couldn’t have that - and we need to respect and support those who think the same - whether they are gay, lesbian or straight.

But I think we also need to respect those of our brothers and sisters who argue that on this issue, we have liberty to follow the church’s often slow, painful and disputed rejection of slavery and gender roles; who believe that we can and must move on this as well - for the sake of Jack and so many like him. I have called him Jack, but his real name is Gene, Gene Robinson - the gay bishop of New Hampshire.

In the days since his Diocese chose him as their bishop - because of his extraordinary pastoral and other gifts - he received frequent death-threats and constant vilification from fellow-bishops and Christians world-wide, but he believed (and still believes) that he was doing the right thing - a bit like a Luther, I guess, taking on the whole church, a bit like the Sydney Anglican Church in its radical intentions to go against world-wide Anglican opinion and custom by introducing lay-presidency - because they believed it to be God’s will.

Gene Robinson went through all the pain of trying to shed his homosexuality; including the ultimately futile and damaging effort to maintain a marriage - which, thankfully, ended amicably and peacefully, for the deep benefit of both.[10] Within three years of their separation, both had remarried, in Gene’s case (once New Hampshire allowed same-sex marriage) to his present partner Mark, whom he met 2 ½ years after he and his wife divorced.

In his recently published book, *God Believes in Love* (which has back-cover reviews from Barack Obama and Bishop Desmond Tutu, interestingly, maybe) Robinson writes these words about how he felt when he entered into the blessings of marriage:

‘For the first time in my life, my heart and my body felt in harmony. For the first time, I was able to express my love for someone through my body. In a way I had never before experienced, I understood what the prayer book means when it describes marriage as a union “in heart, body and mind.” I experienced a wholeness and integration between body and spirit I had only dreamed about. I remember thinking, “So this is what all the fuss is about! No wonder people like - and hallow - this!”’

I don’t know where your own journey has brought you on this broad issue of homosexuality. It may be that you simply can’t accept this experience of Gene Robinson’s as legitimate or moral or wise - in light of your understanding of the Scriptures and of life. I respect that. But hopefully, some of the major issues involved in coming to a mind on this have been at least raised in these two sermons.

Let the dialogue and the prayer and the repenting continue. **Amen.**

[1] I Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10

[2] Homosexuality is defined in Wikipedia as ‘romantic or sexual attraction or behavior between members of the same sex or gender. As an orientation, homosexuality refers to an enduring pattern of or disposition to

experience sexual, affectionate, or romantic attractions primarily or exclusively to people of the same sex; it also refers to an individual's sense of personal and social identity based on those attractions, behaviors expressing them, and membership in a community of others who share them.'

[3] In the past 25 years, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Medical Association have changed their definition of homosexuality to that of a 'normal variant' (like being left handed) rather than as a disease.

[4] John Smid, for example, resigned as Executive Director of Love in Action in 2008. Love In Action was the flagship ex-gay ministry of Exodus International, which shut its residential program in 2007. John now distances himself from the message he preached for years that '*change is possible*'. He now believes sex orientation is unchangeable, and goes so far as to say that he has 'never met a man who experienced a change from homosexual to heterosexual.

[5] It was a Hungarian writer and journalist, Karl Maria Kertbeny (1824-1882), who coined the term 'homosexual' in 1869 in his campaign against the German sodomy laws. The term 'homosexuality' was coined in the late 19th century by a German psychologist, Karoly Maria Benkert.

[6] Plato, *Laws* 1.2 (636 BC) cited in Michael Bird and Sarah Harris: 'Paul's Jewish View of Sexuality in Romans 1: 26-27, in Michael Bird and Gordon Preece (eds), *Sexegesis: An Evangelical Response to Five Uneasy Pieces on Homosexuality*, (Sydney: Anglican Press Australia, 2012), 91.

[7] Note however that what was depicted as wrong (or contrary to nature) was passionate and uncontrolled sex (reflected in Paul's description), with sexual behaviour needing to be cool-headed and rational.

[8] We must always be careful that our theologies, and the hermeneutics that crucially determine their shape and content, are always receptive to truth wherever it is found. It is possible to be negligent, and even immoral, in holding fast to methodologies and theologies that have become unsustainable, the doctrine of inerrancy, for example, especially when adherence to those methodologies and theologies can have such damaging impacts on human lives, as, arguably, is happening currently with the issue of homosexuality.

[9] Henry Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a secular world*, 70.

[10] Gene Robinson, his wife and parents feature in a powerful and relevant documentary 'For the Bible Tells Me So' now on youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=0lhzw04ygxk#!

[11] Gene Robinson, *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk about Gay Marriage*, New York: Alfred A Knope, 2012, 12, 13.