**A Consistent Biblical Approach to (homo)sexuality**

Dr. Keith Dyer
(Professor of New Testament, Whitley College, University of Melbourne)

Placing Bible and homosexuality together in the one sentence always provokes questions. Some questioners are genuinely puzzled, some are angry: Why do we continue to ask what the Bible says about homosexuality when the few verses that do seem to refer to it are very clear in their meaning (particularly Lev 18:22; 20:13 and Rom 1:26-28)? Surely the incessant re-opening of this question is evidence itself of the moral bankruptcy of the Western church as it tries to twist the plain sense of Scripture to legitimate its own selfish and lustful behaviour? How can we possibly justify the time spent on discussing the deviant sexuality of a tiny minority in the face of such major human disasters as hunger, poverty, war, genocide and environmental degradation? How can we fail to see that opening the door to homosexuality in the Church will undermine the Christian family and begin a slippery slide that will lead inevitably to paedophilia, bestiality and all kinds of immorality? These are the sorts of questions that generate so much heat that they often threaten to derail any discussion before it begins.

1. *Do we really have to go here yet again?*

Yes we do. Not because of pressure on the church from gay lobby groups or because of some new argument that will change people’s minds on the issue. The attitudes of people are changed not by arguments or exegesis, but by personal encounters with a friend or a family member who is found to be homosexual and Christian. After that comes the need for exegesis and reinterpretation, as we seek to understand this new reality in the light of our traditions just as the early Christians struggled to come to terms with the presence of the Spirit in uncircumcised Gentiles, against all their Biblical expectations. It is simply not possible, however, to explore the Biblical traditions about homosexuality without first addressing some of the questions above that lurk like unexploded land-mines in the strife-torn field of discussion. We will never clear the ground completely, but it will help at the outset if we can agree that we stand a better chance of finding a way if we negotiate it together rather than by remaining in entrenched positions, lobbing texts like hand-grenades and laying more land-mines to maim each other. So to begin with, here are a few brief reflections on the questions above, taken in reverse order.

*1.1 The slippery slope to sexual immorality?*

One way to describe the central issue is whether homosexuals can ever express their sexuality with another person in a moral way, or whether all homosexual activity is immoral by nature as far as the Bible is concerned. This issue will be examined here assuming the wider framework of loving and mutual human sexuality. Of course, homosexuality like heterosexuality can be expressed in immoral ways, but to suggest that there is some kind of inevitable progression from homosexuality to paedophilia and bestiality, or other forms of abusive, exploitative and promiscuous sexuality, is to pre-judge the issue (Rom 2:1!); or worse, it is to stoop to the level of scaremongering and homophobia. Christians do this all too often, unfortunately, whether from ignorance or fear is not always apparent. How can one enquire honestly whether it is possible to live morally as a homosexual person in a committed relationship, if the very idea of homosexuality is bracketed alongside paedophilia and bestiality? Can we not see the difference between consenting and committed adults, and the exploitation of children and animals? Sexual relations with a child or an animal can never be truly mutual or non-exploitative, those between consenting adults can be, though are not necessarily so. Are we seriously suggesting that all homosexuals are uncontrollably promiscuous and exploitative by nature? Certainly there is ample evidence today that sexual idolatry and immorality know no limits to their appetite and expression, and that they can justify all manner of unspeakable evils in their pursuit of power and gratification. But this is a heterosexual problem every bit as much as a homosexual one, and there is no necessary progression of obsessions on the way to the inevitable disintegration that lust produces in the lives of its devotees.

For some the very mention of the word homosexual is a threat to the Creators heterosexual order; setting up a polarity rather like bad is to good and chaos is to order. This position could be argued persuasively if, rather like The Da Vinci Code suggests, there were a God and Goddess in heaven and all of creation bore their heterosexual imprint. Yet the Genesis account (Gen 1:27) and its affirmation by Jesus (Mk 10:6; Mt 19:4) and indirectly by Paul (Gal 3:28) make it plain that we are created in Gods image as humans (adam) male and female, which is deliberately expressed inclusively rather than as the dichotomous male or female. Our human sexuality is a wholistic continuum, not a bifurcated polarity, and this both reflects the image of God and is in turn reflected in creation by a wondrous diversity. This in no way threatens the importance and sacredness of heterosexual marriage and procreation, which are obviously central to Gods continuing re-creation of humanity and of most living organisms. But not all! In the animal kingdom, the sexuality of creatures like the seahorse and the snail provide wonderful exceptions to prove (as in test) the rule. With reference to human sexuality, the Jesus tradition affirms that there are eunuchs who have been so from their mother’s womb, and eunuchs who have been made so by humans, and eunuchs who have made themselves so on account of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to comprehend this, comprehend it (Mt 19:12). Of course, heterosexuality whether we speak of physical features, gender roles or orientation describes the majority of Gods created order, but it has never been universal or mandatory. As Jesus says: some are born different, and this calls for our understanding.

Whereas it is possible and desirable, therefore, to affirm heterosexuality as the created norm, it should be done so without denying the natural existence of other realities along the spectrum between maleness and femaleness. By their nature, norms can never be absolutes since they exist only in relation to other minorities. Accepting this reality does not threaten the norm, but strengthens and defines it more clearly. It would pose a far greater threat to Christian heterosexual marriage to insist that it should be imposed on all humans regardless of their physical sexuality and orientation. The trauma of those Christians whose partners eventually discover they are homosexual or perhaps asexual is testimony to the problems caused by the unhelpful and unbiblical imposition of a uniform heterosexuality on all humans. As Christians, we should allow the celibate and the eunuch to qualify our heterosexuality; the validity of the single life (Jesus and Paul?!) to limit our expectations and glorification of marriage; and the presence of the abused and the prostitute to challenge our sexual idolatry. We haven’t even really begun to ask what role the affirmation of the homosexual, the intersexual and the transsexual might play in awakening the church to its full glory as the body of Christ.

*1.2 More important issues?*

Yes, there are more important issues facing Christians today that affect the lives of many more people and which must therefore take priority, but that is no excuse to avoid the question altogether and thereby ignore those homosexuals living on the margins of our churches and our society. This is not just an issue concerning private morality and sexual preference. It is a justice issue; an issue of righteousness in the private and public spheres and a matter of life and death for some in our community so traumatised by the perils of discovering their sexual identity and orientation that they live in constant fear and even take their own life. Sadly, this seems to be particularly true of young men in Christian circles, though this is not a claim that can be substantiated with hard statisticsonly by the retrospective reflections of pastors, counsellors and grieving families.

I sometimes wish that I could avoid this whole topic in the hope that it might one day go away. But it won’t, and I cant. I am not pressing for a militant campaign to force Church authorities to change their mind on this matter. Rather, I simply wish to argue in support of those local congregations that are both welcoming and affirming of faithful Christian homosexuals who are already in our midst or perhaps who have been forced out of Christian fellowship by the Church’s stand on these issues and to support the wider claims of justice for all homosexuals before the law.

*1.3 A problem of Western decadence?*

Homosexuality and related issues are not just a problem within decadent Western societies, though they might be spoken about more openly in those communities that have the vocabulary and freedom to permit discussion of what is still unspeakable within some languages and cultures. There are, and always have been, forms of homosexual expression within all human cultures (and within the wider animal kingdom), just as there also have been those who never mate or marry and those born with ambiguous sexual organs. The question is whether the biblical witness to what is appropriate sexual behaviour applies to all humans equally or whether some are born more equal than others. This should not be seen as a heterosexual versus homosexual debate, but rather as a discussion undertaken with an awareness of the full spectrum of human sexuality: including physical characteristics, orientation and the social construction of gender roles. These are issues that lurk in the background of all human societies, and whereas some may rightly be preoccupied with more urgent problems such as hunger and war, the abuse of sexuality by entrenched patriarchies must not be ignored in the process of meeting other needs. It is salutary to note that those who protest most strongly against even discussing these issues may have the most to hide: this is a truth that applies not only at the individual level, but especially in those cultures where there are entrenched patriarchal interests in preserving the status quo.

*1.4 The plain sense of Scripture?*

Those who appeal to the plain sense of Scripture about this and other issues as if there does not even need to be any further discussion of what the Bible says are in danger of reducing Gods Living Word to a book of dead letters: immutable laws written in ink, or on stone (2 Cor 3:3). We are not called to be defenders of unchangeable rules, for we are competent to be servants of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6). From the beginning, we followers of Jesus have been painfully slow to accept that Gods transforming Spirit has had new things to teach us about circumcision, food laws, ethnicity, the animal kingdom, slavery, the poor, males and females, and the environment. To some, the written code about these matters was, and is, crystal clear and absolutely unchangeable. Yet great changes have slowly taken place as Christian communities have taken seriously the power to bind and loose (Mt 16:19; Jn 20:22-23) on these issues to live out what the Spirit of the living God has written on their hearts (2 Cor 3:3)often in defiance of ecclesial and secular authorities. Despite their human shortcomings, Paul of Tarsus, Francis of Assisi, William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, Elizabeth Schssler Fiorenza and their like, have lived the way of Jesus and shown us much about Gods-will-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven. We should at least be open to the possibility that there is yet more to learn and put into practice in other areas too even including our human sexuality. Heaven knows the church has not handled sex well throughout the centuries.

It may well be that our careful exegesis still leads us to what seem to be unambiguous meanings in the Biblical text. There is still the task, however, to interpret how those meanings are to be applied in the present context, and by what authority. This is not to say that context determines meaning, nor is it to surrender to relativism, but to recognize the truth that scripture itself is produced in, and interpreted by, a matrix of culture, tradition and the community of the faithful. This inevitably involves, under the guidance of the Spirit that undergirds the whole process, an examination of the assumptions that we bring to the text and that the text brings to us.

*2. Some assumptions that we bring to the text*

*2.1 The way we understand the Bible*

I have already alluded above to the ongoing struggle to discern the Living Word within the written Word in the context of the binding and loosing community of faith. The starting place for this process is not the Law or community traditions, good and necessary though they may be, but those very people put at risk by the traditions. The ethics of the way of Jesus are always clarified and described at the margins of humanity inasmuch as you have done it for the least of these . . . (Mt 25:40,45)and stand in continuity with so much of the prophetic and wisdom literature (such as the recurring concern for the orphans and widows). No follower of Jesus can afford to ignore the plight of any marginalised or ostracised group, whatever their religious or moral categorisation in relation to the norms of culture or tradition.

Our interpretation of the Biblical text is therefore a divinely biased reading. However much we might struggle to do it, we need to read from below the text to problematize our position of power, and from within the text to challenge our assumption that we already know what the text means. The inspiration and authority of the Bible belongs with God and is mediated through the faith community; it is not carved immutably in stone (2 Cor 3:3) or preserved in ossified traditions. It is manifest most powerfully in the Spirit of Jesus when the understory intrudes into the dominant narratives of the normal power structures the over-story. This happens precisely at those places (in the area of sexual relationships), where unjustly treated and abused women stand up for their rights (Gen 21:8-21; 38:1-30), or their mutilated bodies scream out through the retelling of their story (Jud 19; Hos 13:16; Amos 1:13); where the stereotype of the despised eunuch is challenged (Is 56:3; Jer 38:7f; Mt 19:12; Acts 8:27f), and the possibility of same-sex relationships is hinted at (1 Sam 18:1-4; 19:1; 20:30-31!; 2 Sam 1:26; Mt 8:5-13); and where women of ambiguous reputation touch, and are touched, by Jesus (Mk 5:21-43; 14:3-9; and parallels). These texts should not be avoided in any discussion of human sexuality. They must not be swept conveniently under the mat of a simplistic reading of the law or a vigorous assertion of dogma. They do not, in themselves, overturn the law but they must qualify, inform and guide our interpretation and application of the law.

For these reasons we cannot simply affirm, nor blandly dispense with, the Levitical purity codes, either selectively or as a whole. They must be wrestled with and reinterpreted in the light of Gods ongoing and transforming revelation. For example, the strict prohibitions surrounding menstruation (Lev 15:19-33) are radically reinterpreted by the understory of Jesus scandalous encounter with a woman who can’t stop bleeding (. . . for twelve years, Mk 5:25) and one who is just beginning (. . . for she was twelve years old, Mk 5:42). These two stories of two daughters (Mk 5:21-43) are interwoven and inseparably linked by the touching of Jesus, and by the symbolic use of the two twelves, to make it absolutely clear that thus all women are declared clean. A little later in a similar but more explicit way, all foods are declared clean (Mk 7:19b; cf the food laws in Lev 11) in yet another subversive Jesus story. Thus the understories of Jesus (and of the prophets and others), radically challenge and transform the dominant patriarchal narratives and traditions. It would be foolhardy indeed simply to quote Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (whichever way they are interpreted) as the final word on homosexuality in the Bible! It would be just as unwise to ignore them altogether as antiquated and irrelevant. When we tackle them further below, we should approach them with a desire both to understand their intent within their own literary and social context, and their relationship to the ongoing transforming revelation of God, particularly as found in Jesus Christ.

*2.2 The way we understand sexuality*

Our discussions of sexuality in society and church often reflect the powerful influence of modernist binary opposites male or female; heterosexual or homosexual as if to obscure deliberately the realities that exist between these polarised options. This is most clearly demonstrated at the physical level, but applies equally well to gender role construction and sexual orientation. Modern medicine has tried to resolve every sexually ambiguous birth in the direction of male or female (it is the first question people ask, after all), but the apparent success of the surgery and/or hormonal treatments has often been short-lived. Somewhere around one to two percent of all babies born have some ambiguity regarding their maleness or femaleness, and this ambiguity persists for many of them (and for others not in that narrow physically defined minority) throughout their lives. Even though some of them may not have the genital equipment to fit the normal heterosexual paradigm, is it not possible for them to marry and have sexual relations? Are they not also made in Gods image and capable of faithful and committed love, and of expressing it physically? Or is marriage and sexual intimacy reserved only for heterosexual couples with the requisite bust size and penis length? Heaven forbid!

Some progress towards challenging dominant stereotypes in the social construction of gender roles seems to have been made in recent years. The macho-man is no longer the only masculine role model on offer, and women are not restricted to purely domestic paradigms of femininity. We now recognize that a man who enjoys cooking and domestic chores may well partner a woman who prefers outdoor activities, even though some temporary adjustments may be necessary if they have children. There are still some Christians who quote the household codes (Col 3:18-19; Eph 5:21-33; 1 Pet 3:1-7; 1 Tim 2:8-15; Tit 2:3-5) as proof texts in support of the continued subordination and domestication of women, but they can only do so by ignoring the original context and intent of those codes, and the many examples of female leaders in the understories of the earliest Christian communities.

There is often great emotion and fear generated when it comes to challenging the polarity between heterosexual and homosexual orientation. Some would still prefer to describe homosexuality as a perversion of heterosexuality rather than as the other (less populated) end of a social continuum, and to fear the threat of bisexuality lurking somewhere in the middle. The looming spectre of an aggressive homosexuality that perverts our youth and breaks up marriages often follows not far behind in such understandings. Clearly there are immoral and predatory manifestations of homosexual behaviour, just as there are in even larger numbers amongst heterosexuals. But we must be careful here not to let truth as well as love become the victims of our fears, for God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power and love, and of a sound mind (2 Tim 1:7).

This is not the place to revisit the evidence and arguments over the causes and prevalence of homosexual orientation. We do need to be aware, however, of some of the issues and be suspicious of those who simplify them into neat polarities with black and white answers, lest we find ourselves in the company of those who questioned Jesus, seeking Yes/No answers in order to trap him. Surely it is time to confront the implications of this truth that has become apparent amongst us: there are, and always have been, faithful homosexual Christians in our churches, who do not have the gift of celibacy, and who long to live in a stable, committed relationship with the church’s blessing. Yet regardless of our decisions about this within the ecclesia, Christians concerned for public morality surely should support the efforts of all homosexuals to gain State recognition for their committed relationships, so that they have full rights before the law, including adoption where appropriate. Whether we approve of homosexual relationships or not, or whether we want to use the term marriage in this context or not, some kind of State recognition is an obvious step to affirm for the greater public good. Long-term stable relationships are better for everyone concerned, and can only enhance the institution of heterosexual marriage by providing a different option for those who are not gifted by God in that way.

Our assumptions about these issues will shape the way we interpret those Biblical texts that intersect with these concerns. It is better that we seek to clarify them first in order to open ourselves to the often very different assumptions that the world of the text brings to us.

*3. Assumptions that the text brings to us*

*3.1 Sex as patriarchal power and propagation*

References to sex in the Bible reflect both the patriarchal assumptions of the Ancient Near East and the subversive challenges of Gods way to that patriarchy. Thus, sex is described, defined and regulated from a male point of view: it is penetrative, ejaculatory and its purpose is to perpetuate the male line. A man plants his seed in a woman, who provides the fertile or barren soil for the seed to grow. There is no awareness of any egg provided by the woman. It is the male seed that provides everything necessary, and thus it is the woman’s fault if she proves to be infertile.

Yet at the same time, as argued above, the transforming nature of Gods progressive revelation is evident in the persistent understories of faithful infertile women, of prostitutes and of other women of dubious or ambiguous origins. Their vision of justice and their shameless and unshakable faith in God, keep alive the tensive nature of the Living Word within the written word. It is this Living Word that is incarnate in Jesus Christ and embodied again in the Pauline communities and texts. Astonishingly, neither Jesus nor Paul makes any reference to the procreative purposes of sexual intercourse or marriage. In their understanding, sexual relations are not just a means to that end, it would seem. Equally astonishing is the mutuality of sexual relationships implied in the teaching of Jesus (Mk 10:11-12!) and described by Paul. That a woman’s body is not her own but her mans (1 Cor 7:4a) is stating the obvious in the ancient world, but to go on to claim the reverse that a man’s body belongs to his woman (1 Cor 7:4b) is revolutionary indeed in a world where sex was an expression of power.

It was assumed in the wider Ancient world that men constituted the powerful end of the sex spectrum, and that women were the weaker sex really also inferior males but with their genitals turned inwards. So for a man to lie with a man and penetrate him was to show supremacy over him, humiliate him and treat him like a woman, rather like the way that homosexual rape functions in our prisons. By definition then, same-sex intercourse could not happen between continuing social equals: one man would have to lose face. Thus homosexuality in the Ancient world was invariably described in terms of unequal relationships: typically older men penetrating younger, often pre-pubescent, youths. The nature of such relationships was inherently exploitative, and despite their prevalence in the Greco-Roman world, there was considerable criticism of them from some philosophers and especially from Jewish writers. It appears that ongoing homosexual relationships between equals (in age or status) were not made public or discussed openly, no doubt because of the shameful implication that the penetrated partner would be understood to be weak and not truly male. For these reasons, the public face of homosexuality and of Gentile immorality in general as far as the Jews were concerned was pederasty: the relatively common and promiscuous exploitation of young teenagers and boys (often slaves) by the wealthy and powerful. This is the background against which Paul writes.

*3.2 Public and private Porneia*

It is no surprise then, that porneia (better translated generally as immorality than more narrowly as fornication) is used to head the lists of vices in many Pauline letters (1 Cor 5:10,11; 6:9; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3,5; Col 3:5; 1Tim 1:10; see also Jesus in Mk 7:21). It acts as the opposite heading to agape (gift love, the source of all true loves) which introduces the lists of virtues (Gal 5:22) and is used much more pervasively throughout the Pauline letters. Lest we think that Paul is obsessed with sexual sin, we should note that his positive use of agape occurs at least five times more frequently than porneia, and that the sins of greed and pride are also commonly targeted. We should also note that Pauls focus in naming porneia as one of the prime evils of his age is not on private relationships between consenting adults or on the violation of some deep purity taboos. Unlike the Levitical codes and some of the Christian equivalents in every age since, Paul does not legislate or pronounce judgement on exactly how or when married couples should express their sexuality, nor does he limit sex to procreative purposes only. He leaves the expression of sexuality within a committed relationship to the imagination and mutual benefit of the participants, and encourages them not to abstain for too long (1 Cor 7: 2-5). But when it comes to the abuse of sexuality, Paul is fearless in confronting the ways in which it affects the wider social networks of church and society (see 1 Cor 5-7). The victims are affirmed as cleansed members of the community (1 Cor 6:11).

For Paul, porneia is sexual idolatry, which becomes manifest in abusive, promiscuous, exploitative and obsessive sexual behaviour: worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:24-32). The consequences of this idolatrous behaviour included all the excesses widely known to occur at orgies and dinner parties amongst the rich and famous in the first century: the exploitation of slave girls and boys for the gratification of guests and the lewd entertainments of dancing girls, boys and animals. Indeed, members of some of the Pauline communities had been caught up in this abusive behaviour (1 Cor 6:11, and this is what some of you were). Whether some of the slaves in the Corinthian community were still abused against their will is not clear, but Paul is adamant that sexual abuse and exploitation should not continue to happen amongst the community of the faithful (1 Cor 6:12-20). We still tend to overemphasise the role of the individual (private purity codes) in applying these ethics but Paul makes it abundantly clear that it is not just our bodies that are members of Christ (1 Cor 6:15); it is the body of all of us (the body of youse/yall, plural!) that is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). Porneia, whether hetero- or homo-, is not just a sin against one’s own body, but against the body of Christ the ecclesia.

There is no doubt that sex has again become an idol for many in our age, but I think that often the Evangelical defence of heterosexuality is just as guilty of this idolatry as the aggressive sectors of the homosexual community. Sexuality (of any kind) should not be spoken of as the defining aspect of our personality. We are made in Gods image as humans who have been given the potential for sexual relations, a potentiality that is never realised or remains very ambiguous for many. There is no question that heterosexual marriage and procreation are affirmed throughout the Biblical traditions, but never to the exclusion of those people that patriarchal structures tend to marginalize: the single person, the barren woman, the widow, the orphan and the eunuch. With this brief sketch of some of the cultural assumptions of the text and its context in mind, we can now approach the Biblical traditions with greater sensitivity and openness.

*4. At last: the texts about homosexuality*

The arguments for and against homosexuality are at their strongest when they appeal to the consistent revelation of the whole canon rather than to specific texts. Those arguing for the exclusivity of the heterosexual norm throughout creation, will point to the paradigmatic nature of the Genesis stories of the creation of male and female and their endorsement by Jesus and Paul. Those arguing for the acceptance of moral homosexuals within the church will point to the love command of Christ as the centre of the canon and make their case accordingly. Both sides can construct an argument with some coherence across various Biblical traditions, and marginalize those particular texts that dont fit the case so well. The dominant heterosexual interpretation will tend to downplay the significance of those texts and understories that destabilise the norm. A reading that seeks to claim room in Gods house for the sexually marginalized whilst still fleeing porneia has some hurdles of its own.

For there are a few Biblical texts that seem to refer explicitly and negatively to sexual activity between people of the same gender. It seems that the Jewish legal codes were unique in the ancient world in specifically banning men-lying-with-men-as-with-a-woman and in prescribing the death penalty for offenders (cf Lev 18:22 and 20:13). On the other hand, female homosexuality (lesbianism) is not mentioned in the Jewish Scriptures at all, probably because from a patriarchal perspective, women can’t have real sex together at all because no seed is planted. Of course we cannot simply derive a position on homosexuality directly from these Jewish texts, since they are part of the purity codes which Jesus continually reinterpreted, explicitly and implicitly (as argued above). It would also seem somewhat arbitrary for us to endorse uncritically the laws prohibiting male same-sex genital activity and not those connected with wearing mixed-yarn garments (Lev 19:19), eating black-pudding (Lev 17:12), clean and unclean foods (Lev 11), women and childbirth (Lev 12), shaving hair and marriage by capture, and so on. Many of the Levitical laws we would want to affirm unequivocally (such as those banning child sacrifice and bestiality) but the point is that we have to re-evaluate each tradition separately, based on the further revelation of God through Jesus Christ. Part of this process is to seek to understand the social and literary context of the texts in question, so that we can evaluate the relationship between the intent of the codes and the later transformative traditions.

The prohibition in Leviticus 18:22 is situated in a list of codes regulating sexual relations. Many scholars have attempted to describe the underlying principle(s) that explains this rather odd collection of prohibitions and that connects it to the wider holiness codes in the surrounding chapters. Are they arcane purity codes that can be dismissed out of hand as irrelevant today? Is there some kind of obsession with improper mixing of body fluids (semen/blood/anal fluids), as with the bans on mixing yarns and mixing cooking utensils? Is it a concern for the wastage of human seed that underlies the texts banning non-productive sexuality? There may be an element of truth in each of these explanations, but the most coherent arguments for a unifying theme are those of Jewish commentator Jacob Milgrom: the common denominator of the entire list of sexual prohibitions, including homosexuality, is procreation within a stable family. This is shown to be so by the dual concern in chapter 18 for protecting family relationships from exploitative patriarchal sexual abuse (Lev 18:6-18), and for avoiding sexual and behavioural practices that were thought to be inherently non-productive or anti-procreational (intercourse with a menstruant; sacrificing offspring to Molech; intercourse between males, or with animals, Lev 18:19-23). Milgrom adds the suggestion that the legal reason for interdicting anal intercourse is the waste, the non-productive spilling, of seed the equivalence of Onanism (Gen 38:9-10). But as he points out himself, the sin of Onan was not the spilling of his seed but the refusal to continue his brother’s line and thus the rejection of the responsibility to procreate. A more precise understanding of the Levitical problem with male homosexuality would be that it is a deliberate avoidance of the responsibility to procreate a planting of seed (as distinct from a spilling) where it cannot grow.

If Milgrom’s underlying principle behind Leviticus 18 (procreation within a stable family) sounds almost evangelical in its formulation, his suggested solution to the problem of interpreting Leviticus 18:22 comes from another direction altogether: Thus from the Bible we can infer the following: presumably, half of the world’s homosexual population, lesbians, are not mentioned. Over ninety-nine percent of the gays, namely non-Jews, are not addressed. This leaves the small number of Jewish gays subject to this prohibition. If they are biologically or psychologically incapable of procreation, adoption provides a solution. I hope the Eternal, in love and compassion, will reckon their spilled seed as producing fruit. How then does the Gospel affirm or transform this text? If it is the mixing and purity concerns which dominate the interpretation, then the examples of Jesus and the bleeding women in Mark 5 and the food laws in Mark 7 provide a strong challenge to any insistence on the letter of these codes. If Milgrom is correct that the underlying concern is for procreation within a stable family, then we must note that this procreational imperative is nowhere affirmed by Jesus or Paul, and least of all by current population trends. The context of a stable family may be seen as a particular concern of Christian ethics in continuity with the teaching of Jesus about children (Mk 10:13-16) and honouring parents (Mt 15:4; 19:19), yet the nature of the family unit in the earliest Christian communities was never the nuclear family (a heterosexual couple with 1.8 children?) so fiercely defended by the Christian Right. The family affirmed in the Jesus traditions and the Pauline communities is the extended family, the fictive kinship group, the hospitable household, where no man is called father/patriarch (Mt 23:9, cf Mk 10:29-30). This is the radical vision of the family that transforms the patriarchal Greco-Roman world. For todays Church to support the adoption of unwanted children by responsible homosexual couples (and other fictive kinship groups) would be consistent with such transforming initiatives in a world of broken families. Perhaps Milgrom’s Jewish exegesis of Leviticus 18:22 is not so different to a truly evangelical exegesis after all?

The Gospels say nothing explicitly about homosexuality as such. Indeed there are only three texts in the New Testament which might be related directly to the topic (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10 and Romans 1:18-32). The meaning of the word first found in Corinthians and then the Timothy text arsenokoites (man-bedder/lying with a male; the modern terms arse and coitus are a later development) is much disputed. The word seems to pick up the Greek translation of the Leviticus texts about men lying with men, but it can be argued that it carries the added connotation of male prostitution and the economic exploitation of sex rather than homosexuality as such. The other term used in the Corinthian text, malakos, means soft or effeminate (in a first-century sexist way), which seems to confirm this connection with prostitution since it is used as the slang word for the passive homosexual partner (who were younger men/boys in Greco-Roman culture). Yet it is also used of men who eat too much, read too many books or engage in heterosexual sex too often! Thus it can be argued that what Paul is opposing here is exploitative homosexual relationships (namely, male prostitution and older men abusing young boys/slaves) just as he also opposes exploitative heterosexual relationships rather than opposing the possibility of a loving, long-term relationship between two same-sex adults. Indeed, there is no clear evidence of any specific reference to same-age same-sex sexual relationships in Paul or in any other ancient literature. Rather it is pederasty that is the focus of Paul’s criticism, and the assumption in most literature of the day (and in Romans 1) seems to be that this exploitation of young males by older men occurs when those men have grown weary of promiscuous heterosexual relations.

Even so, the argument that Paul only refers to exploitative or promiscuous same-sex relationships seems to be more difficult to sustain in connection with the Romans 1:18-32 (26-28) text, which contains a descriptive reference to men-lying-with-men, including perhaps the only Biblical reference to lesbianism. This is not totally clear, however, since the emphasis is that the women are no longer under the authority of their husbands (their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, Rom 1:26), and the exact nature of the unnatural relations is not certain, though the presumption should be that it involved sexual penetration, or else the contrast with natural relations loses most of its force. Again, from the assumed patriarchal perspective of the text, any lesbian activity between women would be seen as just foreplay before the real sex of penetration and ejaculation. Therefore bestiality is more likely being alluded to here (cf Lev 20:16)especially given what we know of the lewd entertainments at some Greco-Roman dinner parties though no doubt Paul would also have disapproved of other kinds of public female sexual lewdness. It is clear, however, that the wider context shows that Paul is not prescribing ethical standards in Romans 1-3 so much as describing what he sees as the fallen condition of humanity (Gentile and Jew, see Romans 3:9). So in Romans 1:26-28 he merely reflects the typical Jewish perceptions of immoral pagan Gentiles before hitting his Jewish colleagues with the truth that they are no better off (Rom 2:17f) even if they don’t practise homosexuality, amongst other things. All have fallen short all are saved by grace whereupon ethical standards must be worked out anew in the light of that grace.

Clearly Paul was emphatically opposed to the exploitative and promiscuous homosexuality widely known to have been practised in Gentile circles at that time. Just what he would have said about two homosexuals in a committed and mutually enriching relationship is not at all clear. Such relationships were kept quiet then, as they still have to be for many today and especially in the Church.

Yet even if we were still to view homosexuality in all its forms as sinful, there are certainly no grounds in these New Testament texts for Christians to single out homosexuals as such or to regard them as more sinful than others, or to refuse them church membership or training. Do we refuse membership (or even ordination) to those who have a tendency towards greed or gossip and who occasionally yield to the temptation? What is the Church’s record on disciplining all ministers who have a tendency to commit adultery? As Hays who opposes the ordination of homosexuals puts it: If they (homosexuals) are not welcome (in the church), I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.

*5. Just what is the Spirit saying to the Churches?*

The wider context is always helpful to return to in this debate. The clear focus of New Testament exhortations about sexual ethics (which themselves must be balanced by the far more frequent exhortations about wealth, pride, gossip, divisive behaviour, and so on), focus on porneia, promiscuous, abusive, obsessive and exploitative sexuality (whether hetero- or homo- but predominantly the former). There are certainly no grounds for a fear-driven witch-hunt of those in our churches who have a same-sex orientation/temptation. Indeed, more positively stated, there is a clear mandate in the ministry of Jesus to the marginalised (including prostitutes and the adulterous) for us to support homosexual persons in our church communities and to fight for justice for practising homosexuals under our legal system and especially to care for those who may be suffering from AIDS/HIV. Our ethics if we wish to follow Jesus should be formulated from our position of solidarity with those living and suffering at the margins of society.

Certainly Christians may justifiably oppose the aggressive homosexuality seen in some aspects of the Gay street marches and the promiscuous homosexuality that is found in some of the night clubs and bars but our protests will only be legitimate insofar as we spend even more time protesting against the aggressive and promiscuous heterosexuality that dominates far more of our media and society. Furthermore, we should be able to expect that Christians will show the world how discussion on these issues can be carried out in a loving and truthful way, so that fear, homophobia and heterosexism do not dominate the debate as so often happens, but rather the spirit of love, peace and a sound mind. Would it be such a threat to the good order of creation and of the Church for us to acknowledge the truth that some of our past heroes in the faith were practising homosexuals (assuming for a moment that we all agree on what that phrase might mean)?

I have a dream – pretentious though it may be for me to say it in this way – I have a dream that one day all people may come to value and express (if they choose) their sexuality in accord with the Biblical principles of mutuality, commitment and love, and thereby accept and embrace themselves and each other as Gods beloved regardless of their sexual orientation or genital equipment. I have a dream that even though different parts of the church will no doubt continue to disagree on these matters (as also on abortion, divorce and remarriage, women and ministry, slavery, head-coverings, pork and a host of other issues), they will respect each other’s right and responsibility to bind and loose (Mt 16:19; Jn 20:22-23) on these difficult issues, and trust God to reveal the consequences over time. This dream is a thoroughly Biblical dream in upholding the persistent (but never absolute) Divine affirmation of monogamous heterosexual relationships in both Testaments, and in opposing porneia – exploitative, promiscuous, obsessive and abusive forms of sexuality – which the Biblical accounts also never shy away from confronting. This dream is also a transformative one, in that it envisions an even more inclusive gathering of Gods elect reaching beyond the comfortable norms of blinkered tradition to embrace those who have been made to feel they can never belong.

*Footnotes (in order):*

[Note from Rowland: copying this from a Word document saw the footnote numbers disappear... but you'll get the connection/s...]

\* I use (homo) sexuality in the title to indicate that any discussion of homosexuality needs to be undertaken within the wider context of human sexuality. I use the words homosexuality and heterosexuality in scare quotes throughout this paper to indicate that they are relatively recent constructions and have no direct Biblical equivalents.

\* Even Robert Gagnon’s otherwise careful analysis of the arguments degenerates to this level in places, particularly towards the end of his book. He refuses to admit the possibility of long-lasting, committed and faithful homosexual relationships – the very relationships that our Churches and laws will not recognise or support. He then quotes alarming statistics about health issues, paedophilia and promiscuity which are based on the outlawed homosexual community, and cites their plan for the total annihilation of societal gender norms. Robert A J Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 482. This is as valid as quoting the extreme views of some in the pornography industry and the statistics from their victims to point out the dangers of heterosexuality.

\* Galatians 3:28 is sometimes mistranslated this way, but the Greek is explicit: male and female, as in the Hebrew of Genesis 1:27. The polarity male or female does occur in the Hebrew Bible, but is reserved for discussions of particular people, typically a male or female slave in the Torah. It does not occur in the New Testament.

\* We are mistaken if we assume that the point of the saying is that eunuchs (like the preceding divorcees, so the argument goes) can’t have sex. Clearly they can’t if sex is defined from a male perspective, but that definition is one of those aspects of patriarchal dominance still awaiting the transforming power of the Gospel (1 Cor 7:4b! See further below). J David Hester’s Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities, *JSNT* 28 (2005): 13-40, corrects the traditional misinterpretation that the eunuch is a symbol of inevitable celibacy.

\* I recall evangelists in my youth proclaiming: You are not in God’s perfect will until you have found God’s perfect partner (a heterosexual relationship being assumed, of course). Combine this with Western romantic mythology and the cult of The Wedding and a very real threat to marriage and the Christian family emerges namely a divorce rate amongst Christians that is not that different to the rest of the population.

\* The exact nature of the relationship between Jonathan and David cannot be established from these texts, of course – but nor can the suspicion of a sexual relationship be dismissed out of hand: note the shame alluded to by Saul (1 Sam 20:30-31). As for the relationship between the centurion and his boy-servant, the worst case might well have been suspected from a Jewish perspective in the absence of Luke’s commendation of the soldier (Lk 7:3-5). The possibility of such an obvious assumption about the Roman military does not seem to trouble Jesus and/or Matthew. See Theodore W. Jennings and Tat-Siong Benny Liew, Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13. *JBL* 123 (2004): 467-494, for detailed arguments in support of this type of interpretation. They push them too far, but still . . .

\* Invariably the response to this sort of argument is that if the Jesus tradition overturns all the Levitical purity codes, then what happens to the prohibitions regarding incest, for example? Again, overturn or negate are not the right words – they belong to later Christian supercessionism, not to the way of Jesus. Jesus reinterprets the law in transformative ways and in ways that challenge patriarchal power. We must be consistent therefore, and reinterpret the laws against incest in this same way. That is, whereas Leviticus (astonishingly) neglects to prohibit sexual relations between a father and his daughter (is this to preserve absolute patriarchal rights?!), it may be inferred that the Jesus tradition (as also later Rabbinic traditions) would challenge this potential for patriarchal abuse and reinterpret these codes in transformative and life-giving ways that affirm the mutuality and non-exploitative nature of responsible sexual relationships. Sometimes the way of Jesus requires stricter laws than the Levitical codes (cf Mt 5:20)!

\* The statistics are notoriously difficult to establish, but see the careful articles by biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, The Five Sexes. Why Male and Female Are Not Enough. *The Sciences* (March/April 1993): 20-25; and The Five Sexes, Revisited. *The Sciences* (July/August 2000): 18-23 (both available on-line).

\* The explanation . . . so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct (1 Pet 3:1b) indicates clearly that these codes (modified from the Greek philosophers) were adopted as an apologetic/evangelistic strategy to win over the non-believing husbands of Christian women who were otherwise in potential danger for rejecting the patriarchal gods. As for women leaders, they abound in the Pauline greetings – sometimes despite the patriarchal bias of our translators! See, for example, Phoebe, letter-bearer, patron of Paul and minister of the church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1-2); Prisca/Priscilla; Junia, prominent among the apostles (Rom 16:7); Lydia, foundation member and patron at Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), and many others mentioned in passing.

\* Or indeed, if she allows any foreign seed to grow in her! It is always the woman caught in adultery (which threatens the purity of the male line), rather than the man who is caught in adultery (since he may be expected to sow some wild seed).

\* See, for example, Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 4.

\* The literature on the Bible and homosexuality grows rapidly by the day. I have found the following books particularly helpful: Jeffrey S Siker (editor), *Homosexuality in the Church. Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994). The chapter by Richard Hays, re-published in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark/HarperCollins, 1996), is one of the most compassionate and fair defences of the traditional no-to-homosexuality position, in my opinion. Surely as Christians we can move at least this far in our understanding! Robert L Brawley (editor), *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality. Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); David L Balch (editor), *Homosexuality, Science, and the Plain Sense of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000); Timothy Bradshaw (editor), *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1997/2003); Choon-Leong Seow (editor), *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1996), and Willard M Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2003) are all outstanding examples of open and vigorous Christian debate on these issues. Stanley J Grenz’s *Welcoming but not Affirming. An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1998), is a very accessible and fair defence of the traditional position, and Gray Temple’s *Gay Unions, In the Light of Scripture, Tradition and Reason* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), does the same for the pro-homosexual arguments. Thomas E Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and clarity in the homosexual debate* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), was regarded by some evangelicals as the best defence of the traditional Church position against homosexuality until replaced by Gagnon’s *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. To my mind, Gagnon’s exhaustive investigations lack the compassion and fairness of Hays and Grenz’s work, and are biased by an insistence on preserving absolute gender boundaries (male or female!) and on a homophobic reading of the First Testament narratives (so that he finds implied homosexuality in the Ham/Noah story amongst many others, but not in the David/Jonathan accounts, for example. See 1 Sam 20:30-33; 2 Sam 1:26).

\* The Sodom and Gomorrah stories do not help to clarify the issues. At most, they rightly indicate disapproval of threatened homosexual gang rape (but a surprising lack of disapproval of Lot offering his virgin daughters instead to protect the visitors), though the main issue in the story seems to be the violation of the hospitality codes for strangers. In the Bible and other Jewish literature, Sodom stands condemned for its pride, wealth, failure to welcome visitors, and immorality (in general, rather than homosexuality in particular, cf Ezekiel 16:49, and the strange reference in Jude 7 to other flesh, meaning the angels?). It is a much later development that coins the word sodomite meaning homosexual. In fact neither sodomy nor homosexuality are Biblical (or even first-century) terms or concepts as such.

\* As Jacob Milgrom concludes: Female sexual relations are nowhere prohibited in Scripture, nor anywhere else (to my knowledge) in the Ancient Near East. Surely, lesbianism was known! Leviticus 17-22. A New Translation and Commentary. *The Anchor Bible*, vol 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1568. This raises some questions about the traditional interpretation of Romans 1:26 as a reference to lesbianism (see further below).

\* This sounds plausible, but why then isn’t heterosexual anal intercourse explicitly banned?

\* Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1568.

\* Milgrom argues the case in detail, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1568. Note that a small percentage of women are at their most fertile during the 7 days they are off limits, thus rendering them barren through no fault of their own. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 118, is not sure what to do about the naming of sex with a woman during these 7 days as an abomination (Lev 18: 24-30; Ez 18:6; 22:10), and thus equivalent to homosexual sexual relations in some way. He nevertheless concludes that it is one of the requirements that no longer have force today (121, 137-138), without really explaining why it doesn’t, but the ban on homosexual relations in 18:22 does.

\* Otherwise masturbation would also be condemned as wasting seed, but it isn’t. The Rabbis did condemn masturbation later on, but it is their enactment, not that of Scripture. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1567-8.

\* Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1787.

\* The texts in Matthew that Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?* refers to are rather less clear (Mt 18: 6-9). At best they might be used against paedophilia (anyone who causes one of these little ones to stumble Mt 18: 6), but this would apply to heterosexuals at least as much as to homosexuals.

\* See Dale B. Martin, Arsenokoites and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences in Brawley (editor), *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, 117-136. It is thus very difficult to know how to translate the term in today’s world – perhaps indulgent, lazy or lacking self-control would be best. John H. Elliott, No Kingdom of God for Softies? Or, What Was Paul Really Saying? 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in Context. *BTB* 34 (2004): 17-40, despairs of a clear translation of these words: it is possible but not certain that *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* denoted effeminate and domineering male partners respectively in abusive or commercialized sexual relationships. This meaning, however, is a supposition based on what is known about the culture of Paul’s world and on semantic possibilities (but not certainties) of the words themselves (36).

\* See Herman C. Waetjen, Same-Sex Sexual Relations in Antiquity and Sexuality and Sexual Identity in Contemporary American Society in Brawley (editor), *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, 103-116.

\* The language used by Paul in this section is very similar to that used by Philo, Josephus and other Jewish critics of Gentile immorality.

\* Hays, Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies, in Siker (editor), *Homosexuality in the Church*, 14.

\*\*\*\*

For an earlier article by Keith on this subject see

http://jmm.org.au/articles/12636.htm

An excellent article by Professor Walter Wink – ‘Homosexualiy and the Bible’ –

http://jmm.org.au/articles/23697.htm

See also ‘When God Said He Loved All He Meant It’ –

http://jmm.org.au/articles/25252.htm

And my latest article here – http://jmm.org.au/articles/22914.htm