

## **Homosexuality: A Study Paper on Biblical/Theological Considerations By David Schroeder**

### **Introduction**

The Bible hardly discusses homosexual behaviour. It is a minor concern in contrast to economic issues. If we treated the texts on the dangers of wealth the way we treat the texts on homosexual activity, we would first of all give away all our possessions and then we would radicalize these texts to make them even more stringent than they already are! We would simply say it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God!

But what do these texts actually say? The answer to that depends on what kind of an approach you take to the Bible and its message. If we want to get at what the Bible says to us today about homosexual behaviour, we need to pay attention to more than careful exegesis of the text. We need to be engaged in careful exegesis as well as in biblical and systematic theology.

In our exegesis we seek to establish what the text said and meant in its original language and context. In biblical theology we try to get at the beliefs and assumptions of the writer that caused the writer to say what was said. In systematic theology we seek to understand what this would mean in our time given the way we understand the world today.

Let me illustrate. In 1 Peter 3:3 Peter tells wives that they should avoid outward adornments such as braided hair, gold jewelry or fine clothes. There is no problem of exegesis here. Wives were not to braid their hair or wear gold jewelry or fine clothes. But this is generally disregarded today? Why? To answer this we need to get at the biblical theology. What did the writer know and believe that made him speak this way? We now know that the gospel made women accountable to God the way men were accountable to God (Galatians 3:28). The

gospel had made them to be free women. And there were “free” women in that society, hetaira, who were the princesses who had been conquered in military exploits and were now the consorts of political leaders and appeared with them in public. These women were free to own property and dolled themselves up with braided hair laced with gold threads etc. What Peter was insisting on was that the Christian women were not to be conformed to the worldly “free” women in their make-up and dress.

If we ask, “what does that mean for us?” we need to ask not about braided hair or jewelry but about those things and areas where we are in danger of conforming to the world about us. It may have nothing to do with braided hair at all when it is applied to our situation and yet be a biblically correct application of the gospel to life.

### **Exegetical Notes**

#### Genesis 19:1-29

This text does not speak directly to homosexual activity. The men of Sodom are intent on gang rape. They do not want these men to be given the hospitality of the city. They are shown to break the law of hospitality. Both Abraham (18:1-8) and Lot (19:1-3) kept this law of hospitality, whereas all the men of Sodom did not. All of these men were considered to be heterosexual and not homosexual. Their intended actions were wrong whether directed at men or women, whether done by heterosexuals or homosexuals. It is thus not a text that speaks to consensual same-sex relations. No one could legitimize rape let alone gang rape. The clearest Biblical interpretation of the sin of Sodom is found in a long list of sins mentioned in Ezekiel 16:49.

#### Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

These passages are part of the holiness code, part of the laws of clean and unclean. Here male

homosexual sexual activity is prohibited. Nothing is said, however, about female homosexual sexual activity. In Leviticus 20:10-13 various prohibitions are given and among them is male same-sex sexual activity. The penalty for most of these sins is death. This would be a clear message if it were not for the fact that we do not keep many of the laws of the holiness code today (For Jesus' response to these laws see Mark 7:1-23). For instance, we do not keep the death penalty for a disobedient or rebellious son (Leviticus 20:6) or adultery (Leviticus 20:10). Whether these laws are kept or not depends at least in part on whether they are restated in some form in the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Those who will not enter the Kingdom of God are “fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, malakoi, arsenokoitai, thieves, the greedy, revilers and robbers.” We skip very quickly over this list and focus only on the two underlined words the meaning of which are not as clear as we would like them to be. And what if we would treat the greedy the way we treat homosexuals? (See introductory paragraph)

Translators have their difficulty with these terms:

- JB catomites, sodomites
- NIV male prostitutes and homosexual offenders
- AV effeminate and abusers of themselves with mankind
- RSV sexual perverts
- NEB homosexual persons
- NRSV male prostitutes and sodomites

The term malakoi is not a technical term for a homosexual person. It appears in Hellenistic literature as pejorative slang to describe the passive (soft) partner in a homosexual relationship. These were most often boys. The term arsenokoitai is not found in any Greek text before this NT references. Robin Scroggs claims (and Hays agrees) that the word was used to translate Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

(lying with a male).<sup>1</sup> If this reading is correct, than this text supports the Levitical condemnation of homosexual sexual activity.

1 Timothy 1:10

1 Timothy 1:10 uses arsenokoitai along with the lawless and the disobedient, the godless and sinful, the unholy and profane, those who kill their father or mother, murderers, fornicators, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and all that is against sound teaching. Again we should note the long list of sins included. Again it supports the Levitical text.

Acts 15:28-29

Here the term in question is pornea, fornication. This has a much broader range of interpretation. Homosexual activity could be included under the term but it does not refer to same-sex sexual activity as such. It refers to all illicit sexual activity.

Romans 1:18-32

In this passage Paul speaks about homosexual activity in a specifically theological context. The passage is introduced by 1:16-17. Here Paul speaks of the power of God unto salvation and the righteousness of God that is revealed to humankind. And it indicates that the righteous shall live by faith.

In 1:18 then, Paul calls attention to the moral order created and revealed by God. God so ordained that that which serves life and furthers life is good and that which harms, counters or destroys life is evil. God is sovereign Lord and evil will not succeed in the final end. It will be judged both now and in the future. This is what is meant by the “wrath of God” that is becoming manifest against all evil.

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<sup>1</sup> I basically agree with the exegesis of Richard B Hayes in The Moral Teachings of the New Testament San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996 pp. 379-406. The reference to Scroggs is on p.382.

God does not force people to do the will of God but God *invites* us to do the will of God. God even makes it possible for us to choose to do what is right and good. At the same time God allows humans to make wrong choices and from the time of Adam and Eve they have done so.

Paul seeks to explain that moral perversion is the result of human choices – choices of death rather than life. Moral perversion is the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it; the reason for it is the rejection of God and God's will, i.e. human rebellion. God simply allows us to reap the consequences of our rebellion against God.

According to Paul, the results of our human rebellion (God's wrath) are the following: people became futile in their thinking (1:21), they became fools, idolaters (1:22-23), they lusted after the impure (1:24), believed lies rather than the truth (1:25) and began to worship the creation rather than the Creator. This happens when sexual relations become idolatrous. Paul also indicates that because of human rebellion against God people's passions were degraded. Women exchanged natural intercourse with unnatural and men did the same. (This is the only place where female same-sex relations are mentioned). Human sin led to wickedness of all kinds. (1:29-30)

It is clear from the above that homosexual activity is not the focus of the passage. Paul focuses on human sin and one of the illustrations among others is that sin, or the rejection of God, results in the rejection of the created sexual roles or order.

### **Biblical Theology**

First of all, the Old and New Testaments agree that same-sex sexual activity (coitus) is wrong. In the Old Testament this is applied only to male same-sex relations probably because women belonged to their fathers and husbands and were to be protected by them. In the New Testament where women have become responsible persons themselves, lesbian

relations are mentioned as well, in that women are accountable in the same way that men are accountable.

In both the Old Testament and in the New Testament, that is, in both Hebrew and Greek societies, all persons were held to be heterosexual in nature. All adult men and women were expected to marry and to produce offspring. Any homosexual relations were thus seen and evaluated within the context of heterosexual persons (mainly married men) having homosexual relations. Neither the Greek nor the Hebrew language had a word for homosexuals, that is, persons who have a same-sex orientation. They thus speak of homosexual activities not persons.

Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament addresses the questions we now bring to the text of Scripture. These questions are (1) What advice do the Scriptures have for persons who have a same-sex sexual orientation? Many persons claim that they did not at any point choose their orientation. It was a given in their lives. (2) The claim is made that persons who have a same-sex orientation need to express their sexuality in a same-sex covenant relationship parallel to a heterosexual marriage. Is this forbidden in Scripture?

It is clear from the above that the Bible cannot be used to condemn persons who claim to have a same-sex sexual orientation. The question is simply not addressed in Scripture. Persons with a same-sex sexual orientation have been present in the church throughout the ages. Often they were married and raised a family. But always they were expected to remain celibate or to be faithful to their wives. They have made good contributions to the church. By the same token, the Scriptures cannot be used to justify same sex sexual relations on the part of persons with a same-sex orientation. The Bible does not speak to the issue since all persons were seen as heterosexual in nature.

Since the particular questions we bring to the text are not addressed in the text of Scripture,

we have to develop a theology on the basis of the biblical record that answers the questions asked. To do this is to develop a systematic theology or to apply a biblical theology to our day.

## Systematic Theology

What has the church said so far?

The churches (at Saskatoon and Purdue) recognized that persons who have a same-sex sexual orientation can be full members of the church as long as they do not engage in homosexual sexual activity. The church has thus answered the first question we asked earlier about persons who have a same sex sexual orientation. Though this was a formal conference statement, we have not really kept the spirit of it. We have not invited or made it easy for persons to come out of the closet. We indicated that we as churches were open to dialogue with such persons but until recently little dialogue has taken place. It was as though we wished the problem would just go away on its own.

Is there determinism at work?

The question now is whether there is any extra-biblical information that needs to be taken into account or that would shed further light on the questions asked. It seems clear that there is some kind of determinism at work, at least for some people, that causes them to have a same-sex sexual orientation. There is no agreement, however, on what the root of this determinism is. Is there a genetic, psychological or sociological determinism at work? What would change if we knew the answer?

If there is determinism at work, than we already know that the persons who have a same-sex sexual orientation cannot be faulted. They are not to be held morally responsible for the orientation they have received. If the determinism is genetic than no person is at fault. But we also cannot say that it is God given or is

to be considered normal. We simply do not know that. Just because it is genetic does not make it of good or, for that matter, of God.

If the determinism is psychological, than those persons most closely or most deeply associated with persons of same-sex sexual orientation may share some responsibility for the occurrence. If the determinism is sociological than the whole society shares some of the responsibility for having created the conditions or culture that gives rise to the occurrences of same-sex sexual orientation. In each case, therefore, if there is determinism at work, the persons concerned are not at fault.

No one is arguing for promiscuous sexual relation for heterosexual or for homosexuals. This means that the only thing we are really arguing about is whether same-sex sexually oriented persons should be permitted to enter a same-sex sexual covenant on a parallel with heterosexual marriages. If the church were to affirm this they would need to work out a theology on the basis of the Scriptures. This is the difficulty in that neither the church nor the Christian homosexual community has done so thus far.

Are all claims of same-sex sexual orientation the same?

There has been a tendency to lump all homosexual persons and activity together. It does not seem right to do so. I would think that the three possible determinisms at work that we mentioned above, could all play a part in different combinations in each person. Brian Cunningham, a Toronto psychotherapist, lists 10 different types of cases all having to do with homosexuality.<sup>2</sup> If he is right in this, than it is clear that we have not yet learned to distinguish one case from the other and no one who knows how to distinguish one case from the other has helped us to do so. Were we able to make such

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<sup>2</sup> Listed by J. W. McCormick, M.D. Toronto in *Focus* Vol. 5, Spring, 1988 Nu.4. This is a publication of the Christian Medical and Dental Society.

distinctions we would need to handle each case on its own merits. This we have not been willing to do.

### **Making decisions about new questions**

Who makes the decision?

Our church polity has been congregational. It is the local congregations that set the guidelines for church membership and that make decisions that are binding on the members of the congregation. It stands to reason, therefore, that the primary decision on whether or not to accept persons in a same-sex covenant relationship as members of the church would rest first of all with the local congregation.

If we follow Matthew 18:15-23, we will speak personally to the persons involved as individual members of the congregation first. We will not first establish rules that will keep people out so that we will not need to deal with what we hold to be “offenders” personally. We will rather seek to come to some kind of understanding or resolution before it is brought before the congregation. But in any case, the first point of discussion and decision is in the local congregation.

Such a polity has several advantages. First of all, no local congregation is forced to accept members that they deem to be incompatible with what the congregation holds to be binding upon its members. Secondly, decisions are made in the context where people know each other intimately. Decisions can then be made on a personal rather than a legalistic or theoretical basis devoid of personal and contextual considerations.

The local congregation, however, does not stand alone. It belongs to a union with other congregation – the conference. The conference of churches can affirm or call into question the decisions of the local congregation. It can do so in a number of different ways as mentioned below.

How do we make decisions about new Questions?

First, we observe how the New Testament church spoke to new questions.

Paul accepted as authority the Old Testament, the words of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:10) and the Tradition of the Apostles (1 Corinthians 15:3-5; 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15). This is roughly equivalent to the Old and New Testament as we have them today in that the Gospels and the New Testament letters were based on the Tradition of the Apostles. But Paul recognized that some things had not been addressed in any of these sources. In such cases Paul clearly indicates that he speaks differently to such instances than on questions where there is a word from the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:6, 7:10, 7:12).

Where Paul had no “word from the Lord” he gave his opinion or judgment as one who had the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 7:25, 40). We can distinguish between two types of situations where Paul speaks to questions that had not been mentioned in his sources. The first is in relation to applying the gospel in new situations (1 Corinthians 8:1-13). Here Paul indicates that Christians are free to eat meat offered to idols, but in those instances where they are in the presence of a Christian, who has not been totally freed from the power of the idols, they should not eat meat offered to idols. Paul asks us, in other words, to take the situation into account when applying the gospel to life situations.

The second type of decision involves a new understanding of the nature of the gospel. In working with the Gentiles, Paul had received a special insight into the nature of the gospel which indicated that Gentile Christians need not be circumcised (Galatians 1 & 2). Circumcision had been a sign of the covenant of Israel with God from the time of Abraham (Genesis 17:9-11). But in working with the Gentiles who were accepting Christ as Saviour and Lord, Paul realized that the nature of the gospel was such

that it did not require Gentile Christians to be circumcised. They did not have to become Jews first in order to become Christian. This was such a departure from tradition that the word of Paul had to be confirmed by the entire church at Jerusalem (Acts 15). Paul made the decision on the basis on his understanding of the gospel. It was made on the mission field and then confirmed by the larger church.

Secondly, the Church is to be a loosing and binding fellowship.

Jesus commissioned the church to be a loosing and binding fellowship (Mathew 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 20:23). The Church is to be a loosing or freeing fellowship. That is, to help set people free from bondage. In the same way the church is to be a binding fellowship. That is, the church is to bind itself to follow Jesus and to bind itself to that which is life, the will of God.

This mission of the church is modeled for us in God. In the Exodus God liberated those who were in bondage in Egypt and, at Sinai God promised to be Israel's God and asked the people to bind themselves to keep God's commandments. The same action is modeled for us in Jesus Christ. When we call Jesus "Saviour" we are speaking about how he has saved us from bondage to sin; when we call Jesus "Lord" we indicate that we have bound ourselves to do his will.

The church seeks through its worship and decision making to be a loosing and binding church. But the members of the church do not always agree on what belong to Christian freedom or bondage. In such cases members of the church need to be patient with each other as they seek over time to know the will of God and the leading of the Spirit. What is the church to do when for one set of members "loosing" means setting persons free from their same-sex orientation, and for the other members it means freeing the church from homophobia? It requires patience on the part of all members of the church to come to some kind of understanding of what each one is saying and to

discern together the promise of God for the church.

Why do same-sex covenants prove to be such a stumbling block?

One of the reasons why same-sex covenants prove to be difficult for the church is that they pit two basic Christian actions against each other – hospitality (love) and discipline.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Discipline, because we have always bound ourselves to monogamous heterosexual marriages and sense that any other covenant is unwarranted and needs to be excised from the fellowship. Hospitality, because it is the stance of the church towards all people and the conviction that the church is open to all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. We cannot really move totally to one pole or the other without denying the gospel in some way.

Another reason why we are at odds with each other is that we want to be Christian. We want not only to do what is right but also to be seen to be doing what is right. The problem is that at this point the issues are not as clear as we would like them to be. Neither inclusion nor exclusion seems to be the answer and yet these are the only two options that have been considered. We therefore need to look for other alternatives.

One such alternative is to declare that we are not yet ready to give a final answer to the problem of inclusion or exclusion of Christians who have made a same-sex covenant. We would declare that this is something that we are working on and that people need to search together for that which would be salvific for all. The assumption then is that we will not know that for some time. But with time we would begin to know the leading of the Spirit and could bind ourselves to that which is of the Spirit. We need time to work at a new theology

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<sup>4</sup> Schlabach, Gerald W., "Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What is the Most Basic Problem of Christian Ethics?" in *The Wisdom of the Cross*, ed. By Stanley Hauerwas, Chris H. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner and Mark Thiessen Nation. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1999, p. 466ff.

based on the Scriptures and on our understanding of the nature of the gospel.

What can we do in the meantime?

First and foremost we need to be Christian in our relation to others with whom we disagree. It is especially in times of disagreement that we should let the fruit of the Spirit be manifested in our relationships with others. The fruit of the Spirit according to Paul is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22). None of these should be missing in our response.

Next we should allow some congregations to make decisions that are not made by other congregations without making that the position of the conference and without inviting others to do the same. Such congregations or situations then become the cases to observe to see whether God is blessing this new decision or whether it leads to judgment. It is a way to test what is of God. It is also a way to gain further knowledge and understanding of what all is involved in such a change. In the same way the churches that have chosen to deal differently with same-sex couples need to be observed. They too will help us to see what God is blessing and what God is judging. But no congregation should have a position foisted upon it from the outside but only as a congregation in dialogue with other congregations.

The minute one church makes a decision that other congregations in the same conference do not agree with, it becomes an item for consideration for the area conference and then the denominational body. The broader church then becomes involved and further considerations are made that could lead to a resolution of the problem – a third way may be found that is satisfactory to all the churches.

Once we feel secure enough to have open dialogue we could invite those who are still in the closet to feel free to declare who they are and where they stand. This will not happen until

people, who are now members of the church, will feel that they will be treated in a Christian manner and will not be pre-judged for their orientation.

Why has this particular issue surfaced at this moment?

Some would say it has surfaced now because we are in the process of integration as a GC and MC church. Although this has entered the discussion about membership and is being used as a litmus test to check on the sincerity of the dialogue partners, it is hardly the reason why it has surfaced at this time.

I believe much more that the Spirit of God brings things to the surface for the church to deal with at a time when the church is ready to deal with them. It is the same as in our personal lives. When we have suppressed things that are too difficult for us to handle, they will arise to consciousness at a time when we are able to deal with them. Thus it is that in our day the question of the peace position has surfaced for many denominations in a new way. Thus it was with the question of women-in-ministry for most of our churches. And I am hoping the time will come for our churches to consider their involvement in the economic sectors of our society from a Christian and not only from an economic point of view. But somehow we are not open to that yet. Maybe, soon, the Spirit of God will force us to consider this as well.

Regardless of how the question is answered in the integration process, the question of Christian same-sex covenants will not go away until all of the churches or denominations have seriously dealt with the problem. If it is not properly dealt with it will divide churches and families against each other and we will do untold violence to one another in the process.

I think that the church is now ready to deal with the question of homosexuality in a way that avoids the either-or solution of inclusion or exclusion. What the solution will be I do not know. I only know that if all participants in the

discussion will really search for the will of God, the Spirit of God will lead us to the proper way.

What are we looking for?

God is a God of promise (Genesis 12:1ff). God comes with the promise of life to us in times of crises just as God met Abraham at a time when Abraham and Sarah did not know how they could sustain life for their people amongst a foreign people. What we need to do now is to search for the promise of life for us in this crisis. When it comes, it will be a promise of life for those with same-sex orientation as well as for the rest of the church. When it comes, we will recognize it to be the leading of the Spirit of God.

In terms of chronological time (chronos) we do not know how long this will take. If people on both sides of the discussion choose to be stubborn in the discussions and are more intent on convincing people than on trying to hear what God is saying, then we will never come to a time of resolution. In terms of critical (kairos) time we have some idea. If all of us together search for the promise of God that this situation presents to us, and if we do so with all our hearts, then the time will come when we will say with the church in Paul's day "I seemed good to the Spirit and to us...". Then we will know what is of God. May God give us the grace to look for the promise of God for the church of our day!

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NOTE: In this article I give reasons why, as well as on what things, the church should be in dialogue with persons who do not share the church's position. I do not state as clearly the position I myself would take in such a dialogue. People have a right to know where I stand on the basic affirmations made by Mennonite Church Canada. In this respect, I hold firmly to the statement made at the General Conference Annual Sessions held at Saskatoon, SK., July 21-27, 1986. I agree with the "affirmations" made at that time, with the "confession" made and with the "covenant" statement. I affirm also what is given in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and the Resolution on the issue of homosexuality accepted at the Conference of Mennonites in Canada annual meeting at Stratford, ON, in 1998. – David Schroeder.