

## **Homosexuality and the Bible: Reflections of a Biblical scholar.**

The Revd Canon Professor Loveday Alexander  
*Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield*  
*Canon-Theologian Emeritus, Chester Cathedral*

### **1. Homophobia and the shifting moral landscape**

At the heart of the Pilling report is a strong call to the church to resist homophobia and to offer a welcoming and inclusive space for people of homosexual orientation ('LGBT'). Both sides on the working party agree that the Church of England needs to take a firm stance against homophobia and in favour of inclusion and acceptance of 'LGBT' people within the church. Thus the Report states:

- §1. We warmly welcome and affirm the presence and ministry within the Church of gay and lesbian people, both lay and ordained. (22, 149)
- §5. Homophobia — that is, hostility to homosexual people — is still as serious a matter as it was, and the Church should repent for the homophobic attitudes it has sometimes failed to rebuke and should stand firmly against it whenever and wherever it is to be found. (149)

This stance is heartily endorsed in Keith Sinclair's dissenting statement:

- I am in agreement with Recommendations 5-7 and absolutely committed to challenging prejudice against or exclusion of those we may perceive as being different from ourselves, whatever form of difference that may take. ... The need to repent of our readiness to exclude, judge and patronize those who are different from ourselves, whatever those differences may be, has become even clearer to me. [120]

This stance represents a major advance on previous statements of the Church of England, and is to be thoroughly welcomed. It recognises the existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered ('LGBT') people as a small but constant percentage of the population for whom same-sex attraction is not a free choice but a 'given,' a part of their sexual identity. People who fall into this category, like other minorities in human society, have experienced fear and loathing, mockery and discrimination throughout human history. It is good that the Church is ready to recognise this and to repent of her own part in it.

But I don't think the implications of this stance have been fully grasped. We don't talk (as a church) of being 'inclusive' towards murderers (say), or of repenting of negative attitudes towards financial fraud. (We will of course want to stress that the church is there for sinners — but we don't thereby condone the sin.) The language of inclusion is the language we use not of moral categories but of social or anthropological categories (race, gender, disability). In other words, simply by talking about 'homophobia,' the Report represents a significant shift from the biblical

viewpoint which sees homosexual practice as ‘sin’ and *has no concept of homosexual identity or ‘orientation’* (a concept which did not emerge until the 19<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>1</sup>

This report thus represents — for both sides — a significant shift in what we might call *the anthropology of desire*: that is, the way we understand sexual preference and desire as part of our sexual identity. This shift is based not on the Bible but on *reason* — that is, on a social perception widely shared across western European culture. The jury is out (as Pilling recognises) on just how far our sexual identity depends on genetic or on environmental factors, or on a mixture of the two. But the underlying perception that our sexual identity is not about moral choice but about ‘orientation’ is now the consensus position in western European society, and especially among the younger generation who don’t even remember how recently homosexual activity was decriminalised in this country.

I don’t think we should underestimate the huge (and surprisingly rapid) cultural shift that is involved here. But I am convinced that this is not simply a cultural fad but a genuine shift in moral perception, based not only on the solid evidence of psychiatry and medical science, but on the day-to-day experience of countless gay youngsters and their heterosexual parents and grandparents. It is a shift as momentous in its way as the shift in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century perception of the ethics of slavery (though that was a shift in the opposite direction, from social category to moral issue) — and as troubling in its challenge to centuries of biblical interpretation.

But if the moral landscape has shifted, where does that leave the Bible? If the world of the Bible and the world we live in have moved apart, like tectonic plates, where does that leave the Christian believer, with a foot on both sides, trying to straddle the cognitive gap? That, in essence, is the question at the heart of the debates that we have been wrestling with over the past decade. These debates raise acutely the question of the relationship between an authoritative religious text from the past – the Bible – and a society whose understanding of sexuality and gender roles is rapidly changing, along with its understanding of human psychology and physiology – all of which has to be factored into the ethical debate.

For some people, it’s our culture that is wrong, not the Bible: the church needs to affirm biblical teaching and stand out against the prevailing culture. For many others (both inside and outside the church), the Bible’s negative statements about women and gays belong with those ‘texts of terror’ which have been used over the centuries ‘to authorize appalling abuse, even murder, of women, Jews, slaves, colonized peoples, homosexuals’ – texts which come from ‘a culture whose ethical presuppositions and dispositions were inferior to the best of our own, a culture that was xenophobic, patriarchal, classist, and bloodthirsty.’<sup>2</sup> The pace of criticism seems if anything to have accelerated during the debate over gay marriage over the past couple of years, with many young people (under 40, that is) simply walking away

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<sup>1</sup> On the emergence and definition of the concept, see Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), pp.5-10.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen F. Davies and Richard B. Hays (ed.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p.165.

from a church which they regard as ‘evil’ and a Bible that belongs to a world they don’t recognise, which speaks with the voices of prejudice and oppression.<sup>3</sup>

But ‘walking away’ from the Bible simply isn’t an option for me, or for the Church. We can’t just abandon this text which has nourished the life of faith for two millennia. I can’t turn my back on a text which has sustained and informed my own faith for as long as I can remember. We have to stay with the Bible — but we have to find a way of making sense of it, in a world that is very different from the world (or rather worlds) in which it was written. This is one of the key theological tasks facing us in the church today; and in this paper I want to share with you some of the principles and strategies I would adopt, as a biblical scholar, to tackle it. I should stress that this is very much my own personal approach: but I hope it may help to open up some of the moves we might make to resolve the dilemmas we face in seeking to make sense of the Bible in today’s church — and today’s world.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Scripture, tradition and reason.

So the first set of questions raised by this report are questions about hermeneutical method: and more particularly, in an Anglican context, a question about the relationship between scripture, tradition, and reason. This is a case where reason seems to lead in a direction that is (on the face of it) at odds with the united witness of scripture and tradition. This is not of course a new problem: it is one the church has had to face over the gender issues, and one that most believers have to face (though the church has not attempted a public statement on this) over scientific issues such as evolution and creation.

But we need to note that *both sides* represented in the Pilling report face the same problem here. It is a problem that is faced by any faith, culture or discipline which invests authority in a canonic text: that is, the need to ‘find an interpretation that harmonizes with the facts’. The text says one thing, the facts (science, perception, experience) say another: the task of *theological* interpretation (as opposed to historical interpretation, which doesn’t have this problem) is to bridge the credibility gap. If we can’t, then something has to give: either reason, or the authority of the text. And it is a measure of the seriousness with which we invest the authority of the text that we would even attempt to find a way of ‘making sense’ of both. The task of creative hermeneutics is only for those who take Scripture seriously.<sup>5</sup>

We often speak as if Scripture, tradition and reason are autonomous and isolated streams of revelation: but in fact they are inextricably intertwined. Already in scripture (as F.F.Bruce pointed out years ago) ‘we can recognise the threefold cord:

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<sup>3</sup> This point is strikingly confirmed by the research by Linda Woodhead and Rob Warner quoted in the ‘Church Health Check’ section of the *Church Times* on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2014. Woodhead (p.24) notes a ‘striking disconnect between wider social values and the Church’s official teaching.’ ‘There has been a values revolution since the 1980s in Britain over the status and treatment of women, gay people, and children,’ with the result that young people today ‘now state a strong moral objection [to the church]’ and see the church as prejudiced because “it discriminates against women and gay people”. Warner (p.25) notes that the Church is increasingly coming under judgment from the ‘new moral consensus,’ which has ‘shifted irrevocably — not just among non-Christians but among Christians, too.’

<sup>4</sup> Loveday Alexander, ‘God’s Frozen Word: Canonicity and the Dilemmas of Biblical Studies Today,’ *Expository Times* 117/6 (2006), pp.237-42.

<sup>5</sup> See the excellent series of studies in Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (ed.). *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).

Scripture; interpretative tradition (incipient, but already necessary); reason (apart from which neither text nor interpretation could have been understood).<sup>6</sup> The scriptural writers themselves are embedded in the rational processes of their own culture, as are the continuous processes of translation and interpretation that preserve the scriptures in the life of the church.<sup>7</sup>

‘Reason’ in this debate stands not simply for an abstract process of logical deduction: we could also describe it as a way of paying attention to the world.<sup>8</sup> And it is a purely arbitrary assumption that everything that happens in the world is automatically contrary to the will of God. Not all moral shifts are godless: some of them (slavery is a case in point) may actually owe something to the effects of centuries of Christian thinking within society. Listening to the voice of reason and experience is consistent with the prophetic hermeneutic to which Scripture itself bears witness, a hermeneutic that starts by paying attention to what God is doing in the world before trying to make sense of it within a scriptural framework. And this is a hermeneutic deeply embedded within Scripture itself.

‘Tradition’ too should not be conceived in a static fashion. As Richard Bauckham points out, ‘The Christian tradition is by no means inevitably traditionalist. Its eschatological hope and its missionary orientation press it towards constantly changing contextualizations of the Gospel, in which the resources of the past are brought into critical relationship with the present context with a view to the future.’<sup>9</sup>

This is a hermeneutic that treats the Bible not as a text frozen in time but as the word of the Living God; and this process of ‘contemporization’ is already evident in scripture itself.<sup>10</sup> We can illustrate it from a passage from Acts (chs 10-15), which shows the church wrestling with a paradigm shift every bit as traumatic as the debates over gender and sexuality we wrestle with today. For Peter and the apostles, the admission of Gentiles to the church challenged inherited taboos and traditional readings of Scripture just as acutely as those debates challenge ours.<sup>11</sup>

- In Acts ch.10, Peter is led out by the Spirit, step by painful step, into the realisation that ‘God is no respecter of persons’ (10.34). God isn’t only at work inside the faith community, God is at work in the world, among people who look like ‘outsiders,’ people classed as ‘unclean,’ people whom God inspires to reach out and ask for a share in the saving Word about Jesus of Nazareth. And when Peter (cautiously and hesitantly) offers to share that Word with them, to share his testimony, it is God

<sup>6</sup> F.F.Bruce, ‘Scripture in relation to Tradition and Reason,’ in Bauckham & Drewery, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason*, pp.35-64.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> It is an ‘error to think that the only law which God hath appointed unto men ... is the sacred scripture.’ Hooker I xiv.4, cited by Henry Chadwick in Bauckham and Drewery, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason*, p.294.

<sup>9</sup> Bauckham and Drewery, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason*, p.137.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ellen F. Davis, ‘Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic,’ in Davis and Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, pp.163-80.

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller exegesis, see Loveday Alexander, ‘“This is That”: The Authority of Scripture in the Acts of the Apostles,’ in Aaron Son (ed.), *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for His 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), pp.55-72; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

who showers them with the blessing of the Spirit, before baptism or any formal statement of faith.

- This is the story that Peter re-tells to the apostles and the assembled church, first in ch.11 and again in ch.15, when the church is meeting in council with delegates from Antioch to resolve the conditions of Gentile admission to the church.
- But it is left to James to seek a revelatory framework in scripture for understanding what God is doing in the present (Acts 15.15). The Bible is full of texts that call for a radical separation between the people of God and the ‘unclean’ Gentile world. But ethical dilemmas are not solved simply by adding up proof-texts or majority voting. What James does is to find a prophetic text which (with the aid of contemporary exegetical techniques, that is with the aid of reason) allows him to envisage the different future into which God is leading his people, the future Kingdom to which the story of Jesus points.

This passage points us towards a biblical hermeneutic that reads scripture as the word of the living God, a revelation whose meaning is not exhausted by its original context but must be read in dialogue with what God is doing in the present. In other words, Scripture calls us to a hermeneutic of *attentiveness*: of attentiveness to the revelatory action of the Spirit in the Word and in the world; of attentiveness to our dialogue partners in the dialectical processes of revelation, inside the church and out; and of attentiveness to the story of Jesus, with its disconcerting habit of subverting all our moral certainties.

### 3. Same-sex relations in the Bible

It is in light of that hermeneutic that we turn to the prohibitions of same-sex relations within Scripture.

#### 3.1 *What are the texts and how do they function in context?*

The Bible actually says nothing about ‘homosexuality’ as it is understood today — that is, about sexual orientation as a ‘given.’ The biblical texts prohibiting same-sex relations arise out of a very different anthropology of desire — one that is widespread in ancient culture. For the few biblical writers who mention same-sex relations (as for other ancient writers), same-sex attraction is a moral disorder, a voluntary choice made by heterosexual people, and thus an expression of uncontrolled and often aggressive sexual desire.

This is clear from the OT story of the destruction of Sodom in **Genesis 19.**, which includes an unfulfilled threat of male homosexual rape. (This is the story that lies behind the popular identification of homosexual activity with ‘sodomy’ — though later biblical writers identify Sodom’s sin with pride and the abuse of hospitality.<sup>12</sup>) What is really shocking about this story, however, is Lot’s readiness to sacrifice his daughters to gang rape in an attempt to salvage the honour of his (male) guests. Like the equally horrific story in **Judges 19**, this story reflects a value-system in which it is acceptable for women to be treated as objects of predatory male lust, but not for men. In this cultural world, homosexual desire is a symptom not of latent same-sex orientation but of violent and unassuaged heterosexual desire.

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<sup>12</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 46-47.

- Other stories in the Hebrew Bible offer more positive images of the close ties of affection and loyalty that can arise between men (David and Jonathan) and between women (Ruth and Naomi), recognising perhaps that such ‘homosocial’ relationships offered a kind of companionship that was often lacking in marriage in traditional societies.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, both stories of friendship presuppose a background of (heterosexual) marriage as the default sexual relationship.

The ethics of same-sex desire in the biblical writers follow inevitably from their anthropology. Male homosexual activity is mentioned twice in **Leviticus 18.22, 20.13** as an ‘abomination’ (female homosexual activity is not mentioned at all). These passages are part of the ‘Holiness Code,’ which seeks to establish clear lines of demarcation between Israel’s moral code and those of the pagan nations around. The ‘mixing’ of gender roles in same-sex relations (‘lying with a man as with a woman’) is prohibited as part of a wider code prohibiting various kinds of ‘mixing’ (mixed crops in a field, mixed fibres in clothing).<sup>14</sup>

This pattern is repeated in the NT. In **Romans 1.26-27** homosexual practice (male and female) is singled out as specially characteristic of the sins of the Gentile world. In Paul’s anthropology of desire, same-sex relationships are ‘contrary to nature’: that is, they represent a distortion of the default sexual identity, which Paul assumes to be heterosexual.<sup>15</sup> Like other post-biblical Jewish writers, Paul sees same-sex activity as a manifestation of the pagan world’s underlying sin of idolatry (1.18-23): ‘worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator’ leads to all manner of sexual impurity (vv.24-25). As a result, Paul says, God ‘gave them up’ to ‘all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless’ (1.28-31, RSV). This passage forms part of a more general theological description of a fallen world in which no-one, Jew nor Greek, can ‘boast’ (3.27) in the presence of God: ‘since all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God,’ all stand equally in need of the gift of redemption through God’s grace (3.23-24). Two other passages in the epistles include homosexual practices (active and passive) in a list of sinful practices which Christians should avoid: the lists include idolatry, adultery, robbery, greed, drunkenness, rapacity, murder, kidnapping and slander: **1 Corinthians 6.9; 1 Timothy 1.9-10**.

### 3.2 A question of translation

A responsible exegesis has to start with questions of philology and translation.<sup>16</sup> Four terms in the vice-lists in 1 Cor 6.9 and 1 Tim 1.9-10 relate to sexual sin: *pornoi*, *moichoi*, *malakoi*, *arsenokoitai*. *Moichoi* refers to (heterosexual) adulterers. *Pornoi* may be male prostitutes or rent-boys (the feminine form is used of a female prostitute in 6.16) — though the same word is used more generally of ‘immoral persons’ (both within and without the church) in 5.9-11. *Malakos* literally means ‘soft’ and may refer in a general way to ‘effeminacy’ (a quality frowned on among first-century males) or more specifically to the passive partner in male same-sex activity. *Arsenokoites*

<sup>13</sup> I owe the term ‘homosocial’ to Marti Nissinen: cf. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 42-44.

<sup>15</sup> Besides Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 103-113, see also the excellent discussion of this passage by Margaret Davies, ‘New Testament Ethics and Ours: Homosexuality and Sexuality in Romans 1:26-27,’ *Biblical Interpretation* 3, 3 (1995), 315-31.

<sup>16</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 113-18.

(literally, ‘going to bed with a male’) echoes the language used by the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, and probably refers to the (male) active partner in a same-sex relationship.

Though the precise meaning of these terms has occasioned some dispute, there is no real doubt that they identify various forms of culturally unacceptable sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual. But the language used reveals a social construction of same-sex relations as a shameful distortion of ‘natural’ gender roles, in which one male partner takes a ‘female’ (i.e. passive, submissive, inferior) role. To use the word ‘homosexual’ in these texts is arguably to impose on Paul a modern concept that belongs to our world, not to his. Paul’s ethical instructions are addressed to first-century men (very rarely to women) using first-century moral categories that reflect his own hybrid cultural identity as an observant Jew, with a Greek education, growing up in the Roman empire.

### 3.3 *A question of canon.*

The next question we need to ask is the question of canon. The first point to note is that, taken as a whole, the Bible actually says very little about homosexual activity, even in the ancient sense: and it is important to put the negative texts in a broader context. The debate is often conducted purely in terms of ‘what the Bible says’: but which parts of the Bible? Do ‘biblical values’ embrace the primitive value-system of the patriarchal narratives, in which women are seen as legitimate objects of male sexual violence? Or the affectionate friendship between David and Jonathan? So we need to ask, why *these* texts, and what is their position in relation to the biblical canon as a whole?

We might ask, for example, why does **Leviticus** figure so large in this discussion? Are Christians bound by all the prohibitions of Leviticus (and if not, why just this one)? Traditional Christian teaching has held that Christians are bound by the moral Law embodied in the Ten Commandments, but not by the rest of the 613 *mitzvot*: and the Ten Commandments say nothing about homosexual practice. Leviticus 19 also forbids the interbreeding of cattle, sowing two kinds of seed in one field, and wearing cloth made of mixed fibres (19.19); eating flesh with blood in it (19.26); ‘rounding off the hair on your temples or marring edges of your beard’ (19.27); or getting a tattoo (19.28). Are all these equally forbidden for Christians today? It also, of course, includes the sublime principle, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (19.18), cited by Jesus as a one-line summary of the second half of the Law (Matt 22.39). Reading the Law for Christians has always been a matter not of simple appropriation but of canonic interpretation: we are called to read the Law in light of the Gospel, not the other way round.

When we come to the NT, it is important to observe that the **Gospels** contain no explicit teaching on same-sex relationships. In a canonic context, this silence is significant. Many find it odd that a church which has found it quite possible to ignore a hard dominical saying on divorce (on which Jesus is quite explicit) struggles to accommodate same-sex relationships (on which Jesus says nothing at all).

Even in the **Epistles**, we have to note that in none of these passages is sexuality the main point at issue: all three cite homosexual practice as an example in a much longer

standardized list of sinful practices. Paul's view of homosexual behaviour is uniformly negative: it is cited as a sin typical of the Gentile world. But it is not intrinsic to the argument: other sins are listed, and others could have been chosen without diminishing the force of the argument.

### 3.4 *A question of culture*

In the debate about biblical ethics, it is often assumed that the Bible and 'culture' are diametrically opposed: we are urged to hold on to 'biblical' values in order to resist cultural assimilation. But the fact is that the Bible reflects the cultural contexts of its writers just as much as we reflect our own — and with just the same range of dissonance and congruence that we find in contemporary debates. (That's because the Bible was written by real people, wrestling with the challenge of articulating God's word and discovering God's will in real, complex situations.) And this means that in order to understand Paul, we have to take the time and trouble to understand him in his own context, to hear what he is saying in his own terms and not rush to assimilate him to the concepts of a very different world. And that brings us to the question of context: how does Paul fit into the cultural patterns of his day? How was same-sex activity constructed in Paul's social world?

Paul shares the moral perception of other Jewish writers of his day that homosexual practice was a specifically Gentile vice, which was peculiarly abhorrent to Judaism. This perception may well go back to the Babylonian exile and to the need to preserve moral and ethnic purity for a people in exile; it is linked with the commendation of fertility in the creation narrative ("replenish the earth") and the prohibition of mixed marriages in Ezra. The rejection of same-sex activity as a quintessentially 'Gentile' vice is a theme developed by post-biblical Jewish writers such as Philo (an older contemporary of Paul). In words strongly reminiscent of Paul's language in Romans, the Wisdom of Solomon (*Wis.* 14.22-27) traces all the corruptions of Gentile society (including its sexual corruption) to the basic sin of idolatry. Paul's anthropology of desire is shaped by his particular cultural location as a first-century Diaspora Jew living in a Gentile world.<sup>17</sup>

But even in the Greco-Roman world, attitudes to homosexual behaviour were more complex and ambivalent than we might think. Greek culture (as is well known) was much more tolerant of same-sex relationships than Jewish culture. The 'Platonic' ideal envisages a loving and formative relationship between the adolescent beloved (*eromenos*), a young boy aged between 11 and 17, and the adult lover or *erastes*, typically (though not solely) an adult male in his twenties. But these relationships were strongly controlled by cultural codes designed to protect the honour of both parties and ensure that they did not forfeit their status as elite males. The relationship was not equal: it was framed on the assumption that older partner took the 'active' (i.e. masculine) role and the younger the 'passive' (i.e. feminine) role. It was not permanent: as the adolescent matured he was expected to graduate into the role of *erastes* and seek out his own, younger *eromenos*. And it was not exclusive: adult elite males were expected, as a civic duty, to marry and father children, and keep them safe at home. Same-sex relationships belonged to a masculine social world from which wives were excluded, but where elite married men could continue to enjoy a variety

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<sup>17</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 89-102. William Loader has published a series of detailed studies of sexuality in ancient Jewish texts (Eerdmans).

of social and sexual relationships outside marriage, both with boys and with concubines, slaves and courtesans.<sup>18</sup>

How much the ‘Platonic’ ideal shaped everyday social reality is another question (it was not universally accepted even within classical Greek society). Roman attitudes were much less tolerant. Elite Roman males were expected to marry and bear children, but continued to enjoy a range of sexual relationships, within and without marriage. Adultery was a legal offence: but this meant having a sexual relationship with another man’s wife, that is with a woman who belonged to another elite male. Having a sexual relationship with a social inferior — male or female slaves, dependents or prostitutes — did not count as adultery: this was simply a normal expression of adult male power, especially within the household. But on the whole conservative Roman morality frowned on same-sex relationships, especially for adult men who were regarded as taking a ‘passive’ (‘feminine’) role that belonged to social inferiors. Slaves and rent-boys (it was implied) had no choice, but for a free adult male to take such a role was regarded as ‘unnatural:’ it was seriously damaging to his elite status.

These cultural patterns form the underlying framework of the Pauline same-sex texts. Paul’s distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ partners in a same-sex relationship, and his distaste for the ‘effeminate’ male, reflect the perceptions of Greco-Roman culture — as does his conviction that long hair in a man is ‘unnatural’ (1 Cor 11.14). In this he is no different from other Greco-Roman writers of his day, who use similar language to describe same-sex relationships. But Paul also takes over cultural perceptions from his Jewish environment, like the argument that sexual immorality is a result of idolatry.

Paul’s reading of same-sex relations thus reflects the cultural scripts of his own context. Starting from the fundamental perception that same-sex proclivity is a voluntary moral choice exercised by heterosexual people, ancient moralists saw it as an expression of violent and excessive sexual desire (*pathos*) — itself morally reprehensible, and frequently used as an expression of domination over social inferiors or subjugated enemies. It represented an ‘unnatural’ confusion of gender roles, and thus a distortion of the social hierarchies built into marriage and household. It belonged to the shadow-world of extra-marital sexual relations, thus necessarily unfaithful, impermanent, uncommitted; and was most likely to be encountered in the form of prostitution or abuse within the household.

Paul might (in theory) have known the ‘Platonic’ ideal from classical literature (though as a Jew he would have found it as abhorrent). But even if he did, it would not offer a model of faithful and stable same-sex relationships: such relationships, as we have seen, were inherently unequal, impermanent, and non-exclusive. In the Roman world (and especially in the mercantile/artisan urban circles in which Paul moved), same-sex relationships were most likely to be with rent-boys or with household slaves. In other words, Paul doesn’t condemn long-term, faithful same-sex relationships, for the simple reason that he doesn’t know them: the homosexual activity he knows falls under the category *porneia* (‘bad sex’) because it is either

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<sup>18</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 57-88.

abusive (abuse within the family unit, including slave-rape) or commercially exploitative (prostitution).

#### 4. Towards a Christian sexual ethic

Does this cultural embeddedness mean that we cannot use these texts for the construction of a Christian sexual ethic? Far from it (*me genoito*, as Paul would say.) If we have come to understand homosexuality as a matter of sexual identity rather than a free moral choice, that doesn't mean that it doesn't raise moral issues. Of course it does — just as heterosexual orientation does. All our sexuality raises moral issues, not because sex is intrinsically 'bad' but because all sexuality is capable of being a vehicle for the most appalling abuse and degradation as well as for the most sublime altruism and grace. In fact, I believe if we could stop using Paul's letters to fight our gender wars, we might be able to make much better use of them for constructing a genuinely Christian sexual ethic — something our confused generation desperately needs.

But in order to do that, we have to read the Bible *historically*, paying proper attention to the moral and cultural frameworks in which it was written; and we have to read it *dialogically*, paying proper attention to the way theological insight emerges out of the dialectic of experience and debate. And in that dialogue we shall want to pay especial attention to the points where Paul is *counter-cultural*: that is, where his wrestling with genuine moral dilemmas (issues concerning real people, not cardboard cut-outs) allows us to glimpse something of the genuinely new and enduring possibilities of living into God's kingdom.

Paul was not a systematic ethicist (or theologian for that matter). The closest we get to a sustained and coherent treatment of sexual ethics is in the long and complicated series of *responsa* to incidents and questions arising in the life of the Corinthian community which we find in 1 Cor 5-7 (a passage surprisingly little exploited in the current debates). What I find fascinating about this whole letter is that we can hear Paul thinking on his feet, forced by his own congregation — and the new situation in which they find themselves — to face up to a whole series of ethical issues and ask what it means to rethink them from a distinctively *Christian* perspective — a Kingdom perspective formed by the mind of Christ. Paul's teaching reflects the double strand running through early Christian sexual ethics: what we might call the world-affirming and world-denying strands, this-worldly and other-worldly, 'Now' and 'Not Yet'.

##### 4.1 Sex and marriage in the Gospels

Jesus' teaching affirms marriage as a God-given, creation institution (Mk 10.2-12). In a world where it was easy — at least for men — to obtain a divorce on relatively trivial grounds, Jesus invites his followers to high standards of sexual fidelity and commitment (Matt 5.27-32). But the disciples' questioning already shows that this was regarded as an impossibly high ideal: and Matthew's version of the saying allows an exception in the case of adultery (Mt 19.9-10). In other words, Jesus' high standards are already causing debate and revision within the church.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For a full discussion, cf. William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

But marriage is not the only option for Jesus' followers. Jesus goes on to say that only 'those to whom it is given' can receive his saying (Mt 19.11). Whatever we make of the puzzling saying about 'eunuchs' (Mt 19.12), it seems to imply that there are those for whom heterosexual marriage is not an option, whether from birth, from castration, or 'for the sake of the Kingdom'.<sup>20</sup> Jesus himself adopts a single lifestyle as a prophetic choice; he also downplays family ties (Mk 3.31-35), and insists that marriage is not part of the 'new creation' in the world to come (Mk 12.24-25).<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.2 1 Cor 5-7: Bad sex and good sex.<sup>22</sup>

The passage offers an extended reflection on 'bad sex' and 'good sex:' how can you tell which is which? Paul is clearly seeking to mediate between two extremes: a 'liberal' view that 'anything goes' (cf. 6.12 'All things are lawful') and a 'conservative'/restrictive view (cf. 7.1 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman').

- Paul (like Jesus) goes back to Genesis 2.24 to provide a base for a Christian sexual ethic: "Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one flesh with her?" (6.16). For Paul, this 'one flesh' concept applies not only to sex within marriage but to all sexual encounters — a radical (and profoundly counter-cultural) stance which decisively affirms the importance of the body ('the body is for the Lord'). On this view, there is no such thing as 'casual sex.' All sexual acts are equally significant: but their significance can be either destructive or affirmative.
- Paul gives two examples of "bad sex" (*porneia*), i.e. sexual relations that compromise the holiness of the Christian community (both, we should note, heterosexual). The first is a case of abuse within the household, violating the trust on which the intimacy of family life depends (5.1 'a man is sleeping with his father's wife'). In almost any culture this would be a 'taboo' relationship (cf. 5.2). The other example is a sexual relationship with a prostitute (6.16) — casual sex, sex without commitment, commercial sex, as common and everyday in Paul's world as it is today. These are not homosexual relationships: but (as we have observed), in Paul's world most same-sex relationships would fall under one or other of these broad categories.
- But what if a Christian is married to an outsider? Doesn't this also violate the boundaries of the holy community? It seems clear that some Christians thought that way: that's why they were seeking to divorce their pagan spouses (7.12-16). But Paul here springs a surprise — his idea of holiness is much more robust than ours. In this case, the sexual act is 'holy' and has the capacity to sanctify (make holy) both non-Christian partners and their children (7.14).

<sup>20</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 120.

<sup>21</sup> Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 123-43.

<sup>22</sup> For a fuller discussion, cf. Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (SNTSMS 83; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Loveday Alexander, 'St. Paul and the Greek Novel', in Ron Hock (ed.), *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative (SBL Symposium Series; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998)*, 235-256.

- What has reversed the holiness force-field? What makes these marriages ‘holy’? Paul is not talking about ‘church’ marriage, blessed by a Christian priest. These are ‘secular’ marriages (the only kind available in the early centuries) contracted with unbelievers, following the civil laws of whatever community they belonged to — Jewish, Greek, or Roman.
- Nor (surprisingly) is it procreation. Contemporary Stoic philosophers held that even within marriage sexual activity should only be undertaken for the sake of begetting children — otherwise it was ‘unnatural.’ The same view is upheld by Jewish thinkers such as Philo.<sup>23</sup> But Paul does not mention procreation anywhere in this chapter as an essential component of marriage — another counter-cultural move.
- Nor (equally surprising) is it a matter of maintaining the hierarchies built into ancient concepts of marriage. Elsewhere, Paul knows and accepts these hierarchies (though with a hint that ‘in the Lord’ things might be different: 1 Cor 11.11-12). But they are not evident in this passage. A careful reading of 1 Cor 7 makes it clear that Paul’s concept of ‘one flesh’ is inherently reciprocal, both in the studied and careful mutuality of his language, and in the priority he gives to ‘pleasing’ the other (not the self! 7.4, 33-34).<sup>24</sup> *The Message* brings out this reciprocity very well in 7.3-4: ‘The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality – the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to ‘stand up for your rights’. Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out.’<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.3 *Alternative lifestyles: singleness, celibacy and divorce*

Nevertheless, Paul’s attitude to marriage in 1 Cor 7 is ambivalent to say the least (much more ambivalent than the highly selective readings of both Appendices allow). Marriage is good – but it’s not the only option.

- Paul’s preferred sexual option is celibacy. This is not purely pragmatic (7.26 ‘the present necessity’): celibacy also fits with Paul’s apocalyptic worldview of adopting the lifestyle of the age to come (a worldview he shared with Jesus). It was celibacy, not marriage, that became the distinctive lifestyle option of early Christianity, and gave young Christians (especially young women) a platform to exercise their refusal to be conformed to the world.<sup>26</sup>
- But he recognises that celibacy is not a practical option for everyone, and states clearly that it is not to be imposed on those who have not the gift for it

<sup>23</sup> Nissinen *Homoeroticism*, 95-96.

<sup>24</sup> Unlike most ancient philosophers, Paul goes out of his way in this chapter to address both husbands and wives (‘as if he’s swallowed a manual on political correctness,’ as one of my students once remarked in disgust). Ancient philosophical texts on marriage are addressed solely to the male partner: women have little choice, and are not treated as moral subjects.

<sup>25</sup> Rowan Williams highlights this “remarkable passage” where Paul speaks of “mutual rights and mutual belonging: neither partner owns or governs their own body, but makes it over to the other, a very startling idea indeed in Paul’s culture. Rowan Williams, “Is there a Christian Sexual Ethic?” in *Open to Judgement* (DLT 1988), 161-7 (165).

<sup>26</sup> The classic study is Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013) offers a very readable account.

(7.7) — a point to be remembered by those who would impose life-long celibacy on all same-sex couples. It is better that sexual desire should be ‘quenched’ (i.e. satisfied) in marriage than left to ‘burn’ (7.9).

- Marriage therefore for Paul may be seen as a kind of pastoral accommodation to human sexual needs. It may not be the ideal (‘I would that all were as I am’): but it is not a sin (7.28, 36: ‘Let them marry - it is no sin’).
- Paul also allows for the possibility of divorce in certain cases (a kind of ‘third-best’ pastoral accommodation), even though he knows it was forbidden by the Lord (7.10-11). Divorce was relatively straightforward in many Greek and Roman civil codes. The statement that ‘the brother or sister is not bound’ (7.15) is an implicit ruling that they are legally free to remarry, just as a wife is free to remarry if her husband dies (7.39). Paul’s personal opinion is that ‘she is happier if she remains as she is’ (7.40) — but note that this ruling is reversed in the Pastorals: I Tim 5.14.
- Finally, Paul also valorises singleness in both men and women (again, a deeply counter-cultural stance: 7.32-35). The possibility of a meaningful life as a single woman is almost unheard-of in ancient society.

## **5. Where does this leave the church today?**

How does this biblical material help us to resolve the questions posed by the Pilling Report?

- We have to recognise the ambiguity of the biblical material — and its embeddedness in its own social context. *All* Scripture is contextual (not just the bits we don’t like). That doesn’t mean it isn’t also God’s word — but it does mean that we have to use our God-given powers of discernment (‘reason’) to interpret what it means for our own context. And that means all of us — not just the ‘liberal’ side of the debate.
- In the Pilling Report, both sides affirm their commitment to resisting homophobia and welcoming ‘LGBT’ people into the church. This implies that both sides are working with a construction of sexuality that is radically different from that of the biblical world.
- For the minority view (represented by Bishop Keith Sinclair’s dissenting report), the conclusion is clear. Paul does not condemn ‘homosexuality’ as such, but he does prohibit homosexual practice. Therefore those who experience same-sex desire are not morally culpable, but they must abstain from homosexual acts.
- This sounds clear and logical — but is it? It overlooks the fact that the Bible is not a culture-free zone. Ethics and anthropology are inextricably linked. Paul’s condemnation of homosexual acts is a logical consequence of his construction of sexuality — and that construction is derived from his own first-century cultural world. Sever the connection, and the moral condemnation is without foundation.

- How then can it be right for the church today to construct a sexual ethic for ‘LGBT’ people — that is, people whose homosexual orientation we accept as a ‘given’ of their sexual identity — on an anthropology of desire that does not recognise such orientation? It would be like basing our medical treatment of epilepsy on the Gospel story of the epileptic child in Mk 9.17-27. Mark’s description of the child’s condition belongs to his own cultural world, in which epilepsy was a form of demon-possession. In retelling the story in our world, we can affirm the timeless truth (Jesus’ power to heal a sick child) without perpetuating a first-century medical diagnosis.
- What we need, then, is a sexual ethic for people of homosexual orientation that starts from the same premise as the church’s (universal) rejection of homophobia: that is, from the recognition (shared by both sides in the Pilling debate) that a person’s sexual orientation *per se* is neither immoral nor defective, but a ‘given’ of their sexual identity. That is where this report begins, and that must form the basis for our sexual ethic.
- So we can acknowledge that homosexual relationships (like all sexual relationships) have enormous potential for good or ill. Many examples of homosexual practice (then and now) fall under Paul’s concept of ‘bad sex,’ *porneia*: but then, so do many examples of heterosexual practice. We need to disentangle the *ethics* of sexuality from the question of *sexual identity* or ‘who you sleep with’ (as Paul begins to do in 1 Cor 7). The question then is, what should be our response to a homosexual relationship that corresponds in all other respects to the pattern of ‘good sex’ that Paul sets out in 1 Cor 7 — that is, a permanent, faithful, stable relationship that is legally sanctioned by the law of the land? Can we construct a biblically-based theology that would allow LGBT people to engage in committed sexual relationships and to find in them a source of grace?
- The Swiss reformer Martin Bucer, commenting on Cranmer’s 1549 marriage service, says: ‘Three causes for matrimony are enumerated, that is children, a remedy, and mutual help, and I should prefer what is placed third among the causes for marriage might be in the first place, because it is first.’
- Cranmer’s first cause, procreation (‘children’) is certainly an element of Gen 2.24 — it is part of the cultural assumptions of this ancient story. Indeed until the invention of the Pill — and IVF — marriage and procreation were inextricably linked (that’s another 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural shift that has affected all our lives). But the imperative to procreation has never been quite as central in Christian marriage as in Jewish, and it does not play a definitive role in Paul’s teaching on marriage in 1 Cor 7. The Church of England allows the use of contraception — and marriage for those unable to bear children.
- For Paul, marriage itself is a form of ‘pastoral accommodation’ for those unable to endure the rigours of the celibate life. Paul’s ‘Better to marry than to burn’ — i.e. to be tormented with unrequited passion — is the direct precursor of Cranmer’s view of marriage as a ‘remedy for sin’. Unfashionable as it is, there is a practical pastoral insight here that has a very obvious relevance to

the pre-1980s gay scene, where the lack of recognition made it impossible to create stable relationships.

- But Cranmer also picks up on the counter-cultural assumptions in Gen 2.24 — that marriage is about ‘mutual comfort, society and help’ (‘It is not good for man to be alone’); that marriage entails an act of commitment (‘cleaving’), a walking away from previous family ties (‘shall leave his father and mother’), that creates a new unit, a new covenant, a new space for companionship with God. And for Paul (as we have seen) it is this mutual trust and commitment that is definitive to ‘good sex’.
- We need to think about the distinctively *Christian* aspects of the marriage relationship. For Rowan Williams, it is the combination of fidelity, commitment, and mutuality that open up the possibility for a sexual relationship to be *sacramental*: ‘God’s surrender to us in the weakness and nakedness of Christ, especially Christ crucified, is what generates in us the courage to put ourselves into God’s hands. What God has done for our life and joy, we learn to do for God’s joy, the joy there is in heaven over the return of the lost. A sexual relationship that lives from this gift and joy is properly “sacramental”.’<sup>27</sup>

This perspective is echoed in an earlier statement of the House of Bishops:

A true marriage reflects Christ’s own love for us all. He too gave himself to other, ‘for better, for worse, till death.’ In it we learn to break down our pride and self-concern, to be open to our partner as he or she really is, to treasure what is good, and forgive faults, to be loyal, whatever the price ... A good marriage creates for each partner the same kind of environment which we recognize as promoting growth to maturity in the case of children: a combination of love and challenge within an unbreakably reliable relationship.<sup>28</sup>

Given the recognition of LGBT identity (‘orientation’) implicit in the Pilling Report (and in agreed statements already issued by the Church of England), it seems perverse to deny these benefits to those same-sex couples who aspire to live a life of fidelity, mutuality and commitment. Where LGBT couples *want* to reach out to this recognisably Christian ideal, why should the church deny them?

## 6. Postscript

So where does that leave us now? Archbishop Justin has stated that it’s unlikely we shall reach agreement on this issue, even within the Church of England — let alone across the Anglican Communion. So that takes us back to the issue of how we can reconcile such differing viewpoints — such different readings of the Bible — within the same church. And yet we have to — and that is the challenge. We shall need (as Pilling frequently reminds us) ‘a complex process of theological discernment, a

<sup>27</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Is there a Christian Sexual Ethic?’, 165.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey John, *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* (London: DLT 2000; re-issued 2013), 30-31.

process that begins with the discipline of *listening*, which requires the ability to move outside the limitations of our own experience to pay attention to what God is doing in the experience of others.<sup>29</sup>

Paul asks the key question in 1 Corinthians 1.17: ‘Is Christ divided?’ These new divisions may be deeper than our ecumenical divisions — but they raise the same questions. Paul’s letters provide rich and challenging resources on living with division in the Body of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Luke Timothy Johnson suggests that there are two equal and opposite dangers in attempting to define the faith: defining **too little**, and defining **too much**. Both ends, he goes on, have their inconsistencies. The ‘Enlightenment’ end ‘lack any real sense of boundaries. They do not answer the question, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” clearly, and offer little sense of what is demanded of the individual Christian.’ Equally dangerous, however, he argues, is the ‘high-definition’ Christianity that has a strong sense of its own boundaries, how it differs from its rivals, and the demands it makes on its members.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, [such groups] tend to confuse the accidental with the essential. They tend to make some single element of belief or of morals the litmus test of membership and indeed of true Christianity. For some, it is the literal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture; for others, baptism in the Spirit; for others, recognition of papal authority; for many, the condemnation of homosexuality and the canonization of the nuclear family; for many, a politics that calls itself conservative but is often reactionary. Failure to agree means exclusion. Such forms of Christianity flourish because they actually demand something of their members and they satisfy the human hunger for clarity and certainty.

What I find helpful is the perception that trying to define **too much** is as dangerous as trying to define **too little**: and that there is a real danger of confusing essentials with accidentals. There is wisdom, as Bishop Pearson recognised long ago, in the restraint of the Thirty-Nine Articles, in refusing to define any more than is absolutely necessary; and it was the Creeds, not the Articles, that were embedded in the liturgy and taught in the catechism. And in retaining the Creeds as their standard of Christian faith, Cranmer and Parker recognized, I think, the importance of the ‘**reticence**’ of the Creeds: what Johnson calls ‘the blessed simplicity of profession’ (*Creed*, 314). We need to pay attention to what the creed does NOT define (like where you stand on women bishops — or gay marriage) — and ask, is it really essential? Is it a core Christian belief? Should this be how we define ourselves as Christians?

Loveday Alexander  
25<sup>th</sup> June 2014

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Loveday Alexander, ‘God’s Frozen Word: Canonicity and the Dilemmas of Biblical Studies Today’, *Expository Times* 117/6 (2006), pp.237-42.

<sup>29</sup> *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012), 79.

<sup>30</sup> See for example 1 Cor 8-10, Romans 14.

<sup>31</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), 298-9.

- Loveday Alexander, ‘“This is That”: The Authority of Scripture in the Acts of the Apostles,’ in Aaron Son (ed.), *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for His 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), pp.55-72.
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- Margaret Davies, ‘New Testament Ethics and Ours: Homosexuality and Sexuality in Romans 1:26-27,’ *Biblical Interpretation* 3, 3 (1995), 315-31.
- Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (SNTSMS 83; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
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- Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988).
- Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 123-43.
- Rowan Williams, ‘Is there a Christian Sexual Ethic?’ in *Open to Judgement* (DLT 1988), 161-67.
- Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).