

HAVING GOOD CONVERSATIONS ON DIFFICULT ISSUES:

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?

Introduction

Schisms in the Church

Throughout the history of the church, there have been differences of opinions on matters of theology and practice. Within the church's life there has already been two major schisms.

In 1054 there was the East-West schism, which was the break between what is now known as the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

Then of course, in 1517 there was the Reformation which saw the split of the Protestant Churches from the Roman Catholic Church.

It has been said that now in the 21st century we are facing another major split within the life of the universal Church on the issue of homosexuality.

The first schism concerned differing views about the nature of God. The second schism concerned differing views about the nature of the Church. This potential third schism concerns differing views about the nature of humanity.

If you think that this is being a bit melodramatic, then I invite you to study what is going on in the Church around the world. At the moment there are legal issues at hand within the United Methodist Church in the USA, in reference to the legality of the appointment of a 'gay' bishop. And I would imagine that one of the toughest parts of the job of being Archbishop of Canterbury will be to hold the Anglican Communion together over this divisive issue. Denominations are splitting over this issue, and I believe that this breaks the heart of God.

But don't we all read the same Bible?

How we read the Bible

One of the initial problems with us in our humanity is that we read Scripture with our own baggage. All of us have our own prejudices and perspectives. We can't read Scripture in neutral. We can't read it any other way than through 20th & 21st century Western eyes, because that is our context and experience. We can't read the Bible through 1st century eyes from the region of Palestine because that is not our context or experience. So we need to humbly confess that we all have a bias which also impacts how we read Scripture.

This is at the core of the issue we now address. There are going to be those within the Church who believe in what we term 'the traditionalist' viewpoint and there are those within the Church who are open to move beyond the Church's traditional understanding of homosexuality, which has been called the 'redemptive trajectory of Scripture.' This simply means that as every part of the Bible was written into a certain context, so we need to take those principles and apply them to our contemporary setting and culture.

For example, the command to greet fellow believers with a holy kiss is found five times in the New Testament. These five passages all contain the same direct imperative, yet I don't know of any congregation that greets people with a kiss at the front door. Are we therefore being disobedient to God's Word? But in this case the Biblical principle at stake is one of loving hospitality, not the cultural custom of kissing. While this example of contextualisation is fairly straight forward, we are faced with a number of controversial issues in the church, homosexuality being but one.

And whether we appreciate it or not, the church has constantly contextualised throughout the ages. It has been argued that the issue of slavery is clear in the Bible, but that in our generation, we think of slavery as sinful. Slavery in the Bible was just a fact of life. The Old Testament gives laws in reference to it, and the New Testament also speaks of responsibilities of individuals in this matter. Obviously there were abuses within slavery but one could argue that the Bible clearly speaks in favour of it.

The same applies to woman in church leadership. A traditional reading of Scripture would not permit women to preach, and there are those within the universal Church who would hold to that teaching and practice today. But there are many Churches, in contextualising the relevant passages of Scripture who ordain women, and many of those who might be regarded as 'conservative evangelical', ourselves within the Methodist Church in Ireland being a case in point.

In the 18th century rather than basing their approach on isolated proof texts on the issue of slavery, the abolitionists built their stance around the deeper resonance of the trajectory of Scripture. Their compass for this re-calibration was Jesus, who through his inclusion of both women and various groups of socially unacceptable people of his day, challenged social norms and the perceived orthodoxy.

As we read the Bible I believe that we must take it seriously as the living Word of God. And this requires humility on our part as we wrestle with the context in which it was written, and how we apply it to our beliefs and practices today. What we must not do is fall into the trap of allowing the prevailing culture of the day to dictate our beliefs and practices.

Bible passages with references to homosexuality

So let's now look at those passages in Scripture that on the surface specifically refer to homosexuality. The Bible is actually fairly quiet about homosexuality, yet it has become a major point of disagreement, and sadly disunity, within the life of the Church. It is commonly agreed that there are 6 passages of Scripture that specifically refer to homosexuality.

Part of the issue that we must address is the translation of certain words, so we will need to refer to the original languages in which the Bible was written - Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

One of the major problems with translating the Bible into English is the use of different words in different cultures. Even in our own context words have different meanings to what they meant some years ago. Ironically, take for example the word 'gay.' When we use the word 'gay' today we know exactly what we mean; but if you used this word a couple of generations ago, it would have meant something completely different.

It has to be said that the term 'homosexuality' was only used in English translations of the Bible from 1946 and a major part of the issue is the translation of obscure words from other languages for which we don't have a good English equivalent.

Genesis 19: 1-29

The first passage that we will look at is from Genesis 19. In the Bible, Sodom has become code for condemning homosexual behaviour, hence we have the term 'Sodomites'. But as we read in Ezekiel, Sodom wasn't about this at all.

Ezekiel 16: 48-49 As surely as I live, says the Sovereign Lord, Sodom and her daughters were never as wicked as you and your daughters. Sodom's sins were pride, gluttony, and laziness, while the poor and needy suffered outside her door.

In Genesis 19 we have this shocking story of two 'angels' who receive hospitality from Lot. Then other men from the city ask Lot...

(Verses 5-11) "Where are the men who came to spend the night with you? Bring them out to us so we can have sex with them!"

So Lot stepped outside to talk to them, shutting the door behind him. "Please, my brothers," he begged, "don't do such a wicked thing. Look, I have two virgin daughters. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do with them as you wish. But please, leave these men alone, for they are my guests and are under my protection."

"Stand back!" they shouted. "This fellow came to town as an outsider, and now he's acting like our judge! We'll treat you far worse than those other men!" And they lunged toward Lot to break down the door. But the two angels reached out, pulled Lot into the house, and bolted the door. Then they blinded all the men, young and old, who were at the door of the house, so they gave up trying to get inside.

This is truly a strange story. Bizarrely, Lot, who is wanting to keep safe these 'angels', offers his two virgin daughters to be gang-raped by these men instead. In that culture, men showed power and dominance over someone by having sex with them. This story has nothing to do with consensual sex and everything to do with rape.

Whatever teaching about sexuality you might get out of this passage, we must remember that this is more about hospitality, and how we treat the stranger among us. Sodom was destroyed because its people didn't take God seriously about caring for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, or the outcast.

So we move now to Leviticus where there are a couple of verses that we need to look at

Leviticus 18: 22 Do not practice homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman. It is a detestable sin.

Leviticus 20: 13 If a man practices homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman, both men have committed a detestable act. They must both be put to death, for they are guilty of a capital offence.

These verses in Leviticus are often quoted as the issue on homosexuality being 'black and white'.

The 'Levitical laws' are important, foundational commandments for a nomadic people looking to survive - for a people on the move. So context once again is important.

If you choose to read the Levitical laws consistently like a list of 'dos and do nots' then you will simply get into all kinds of theological and social trouble. For example, it prohibits planting your field with two different kinds of seed or wearing clothing woven from two different kinds of thread, so no polycotton allowed (19: 19b); and there's no eating shellfish, and I like garlic prawns! (11:9-12). There are many other things that we could

say about this list that might sound flippant, but it simply goes to illustrate the difficulty of reading the text.

Fundamentalist scholars will say that these laws are a combination of some civil, ceremonial and moral laws; and they will argue that common sense can dictate which is which; and that whilst the civil and ceremonial laws applied only to the Jews, the moral laws still hold for Christians today. But then it is open to judgment as to which are which.

Revisionist scholars, who will challenge the text and wish to revise it, will argue that as Jesus did away with the 'Old Covenant' it's laws are not applicable for Christians who live in the 'New Covenant.'

Again, we see how easy it is interpret Scripture in different ways. Let's move into the New Testament and to Paul's teaching to the churches.

Romans 1: 18-32

Verses 24-27 *So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved.*

Paul is writing this letter to Rome after his missionary tour of the Mediterranean. On his journey Paul had seen great temples built to honour Aphrodite, Diana, and other fertility gods and goddesses of sex instead of the one true God. Apparently, these priests and priestesses engaged in some odd sexual behaviours - including castrating themselves, carrying on drunken sexual orgies, and even having sex with young temple prostitutes (male and female) - all to honour the gods of sex and pleasure.

The Bible is clear that sexuality is a gift from God. Our Father celebrates our passion. But the Bible is also clear that when passion gets control of our lives, we're in deep trouble.

When we live for pleasure, when we forget that we are God's children and that God has great dreams for our lives, we may end up serving the false gods of sex and passion, just as they did in Paul's time. In our obsession with pleasing self, we may even walk away from the God who created us.

Steve Chalke makes the argument that 'Idolatry, promiscuity and shrine prostitution are what Paul is addressing in Romans 1 - not same-sex relationships between faithful and committed partners.'

This passage is clearly not about same-sex behaviour carte blanche. It's about gross misuse of power, Roman elitist overindulgence, and misguided over-sexualised spirituality.

There are plenty of scholars who believe that this passage is simply about excessive lust: the central problem with lust in Romans 1 is that it is an expression of idolatry in a specific sense: lust involves serving one's own self-seeking desires rather than worshipping the one true God.

1 Corinthians 6: 9-11 Don't you realise that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people - none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Timothy 1: 8-11 We know that the law is good when used correctly. For the law was not intended for people who do what is right. It is for people who are lawless and rebellious, who are ungodly and sinful, who consider nothing sacred and defile what is holy, who kill their father or mother or commit other murders. The law is for people who are sexually immoral, or who practice homosexuality, or are slave traders, liars, promise breakers, or who do anything else that contradicts the wholesome teaching that comes from the glorious Good News entrusted to me by our blessed God.

The word 'homosexuality' in these two passages come from two Greek words 'Malakoi' and 'Arsenkoitai'.

'Malakoi' can be best defined as 'effeminate.' It's a Greek word that literally means 'soft' and is used to describe fine clothing elsewhere in the New Testament. In a moral context, this word is actually more about 'lack of self-control, weakness, laziness, or cowardice.'

There were sexual connotations for 'malakoi' as well, but again, it always points back to uncontrolled acts of lust or misused sexuality - regardless of the gender or act. The word was not understood to reference same-sex behaviour until more recent English translations.

'Arsenkoitai' is more bizarre and hard to grasp. Many believe that St. Paul actually invented the word, as it is extremely rare in ancient Greek literature.

The word literally is a combination of two other words in Greek: arsen (male) and koites (bed). So, arsenkoitai could be translated literally as 'male-bedders.' And this word was understood by Bible translators to mean male-male sexual intercourse.

The word 'arsenkoitai' is sometimes translated as 'those who practice homosexuality' or 'sexual offenders' or 'perverts.'

But when the word is used elsewhere in ancient Greek literature, it references to the abuse of the poor (as in the Sibylline Oracles) or 'economic exploitation and power abuses (as in a 2nd century text called 'the Acts of John').' The Acts of John lists 'arsenkoitai' amongst a list of sins separate from a catalog of other sexual sins. So many believe that 'arsenkoitai' is actually more about economic abuses and exploitation.

Which is why the ancient act of 'pederasty' is often brought up in relation to passages like this - this is the practice of Greek elite elder men who would adopt young men to use as sexual objects. As I said earlier, in the ancient world, men used same-sex activity to express their power and dominance over another.

The Bible says more about other matters related to human sexuality as well as the abuse of it.

As we read the Bible, we are confronted with many practices that we wouldn't condone today. For example, stoning those who commit adultery.

Deuteronomy 22: 20-21 ...suppose the man's accusations are true, and he can show that she was not a virgin. The woman must be taken to the door of her father's home, and there the men of the town must stone her to death, for she has committed a disgraceful crime in Israel by being promiscuous while living in her parents' home. In this way, you will purge this evil from among you.

Yet I don't see many people getting stoned by representatives of society.

Deuteronomy 22: 22 If a man is discovered committing adultery, both he and the woman must die. In this way, you will purge Israel of such evil. This seems really unfair to the woman in this matter!

And some churches are more accepting of divorce than others.

Mark 10: 11-12 He (Jesus) told them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries someone else, she commits adultery.'

The list goes on: The Bible says clearly that sex with a prostitute is acceptable for the husband but not for the wife. Polygamy (more than one wife) is acceptable, as is a king having many concubines. Slavery and sex with slaves, marriage of girls aged 11-13 , and treatment of women as property are all accepted practices in the Scriptures. On the other hand, there are strict prohibitions against interracial marriage, birth control, discussing or even naming a sexual organ, and seeing one's parents nude.

So how we read the Bible is important. If we simply read the Bible as a set of legalistic rules, then we are going to tie ourselves in knots.

Conclusion

So what is my conclusion on what I believe the Bible says about homosexuality?

I believe that we need to be careful not to pick and choose certain verses in the Bible, that back-up our preconceived viewpoints. Scripture is all about God our Father who, through his Son Jesus Christ and in the power of his Spirit, engages in a loving relationship with his creation. And humanity is the zenith of his creation. And sexuality is part and parcel of our humanity. And our humanity in its entirety, like the issue of homosexuality, is incredibly complex.

There is no record of Jesus having said anything on the matter of homosexuality. The Bible is a complicated library of books with antiquated, complicated Hebrew and Greek terminology and social contexts.

I am thankful that our denomination is wrestling with this complex matter - that we have been encouraged to have good conversations on these difficult issues. For some Christians, it is a non-issue because they believe the issue is 'black and white.' For other Christians, it is more 'grey'. For many, the issue is more about personal convictions and preferences than anything else.

This is an important topic within the life of the church. However, I'm concerned that many Christians place an inappropriate amount of time and energy on the matter, when I think there are much more crucial matters to address in God's kingdom.

For me, the Bible speaks to us about our common humanity and the invitation to share our life with God who through Jesus offers a rich and satisfying life (John 10: 10). As we continue to read God's Word together, we do it in the context of a loving community of

God's people with humility at the core. We must always be careful not to use proof-texts to judge our sisters and brothers in the Lord.

I believe that the issue isn't as cut and dried as many like to believe. As I read Scripture and wrestle with it, prayerfully under the Spirit's guidance and with the Spirit's help, my conclusion is that the waters are sufficiently muddied when it comes to understanding God's view of homosexuality. And as someone entrusted to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ under the discipline of the Methodist Church, I am content to continue to wrestle with God's Word under the guidance of God's Spirit, and in the context of a loving community of God's people.

And as I continue that journey I am reminded of what John said...

1 John 4: 7-8 Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

1 John 4: 16b-21 We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.

Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first. If someone says, "I love God," but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their fellow believers.

As the living Word of God, Jesus came full of grace and truth (John 1: 14). We speak a lot about truth, but the universal Church can't decide together what is truth when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. So until it does, if it ever does, I'm going to follow the path of grace. When I stand before Almighty God, I'd rather do so having erred on the side of grace.

Amen.

Scripture references are taken from the New living Translation

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