

The Christian and Homosexuality

By Dr Ruth Ward

The subject of homosexuality is one of the most hotly debated issues in the Christian church at present. This article will try to examine what the Bible says about homosexuality, summarize the scientific research to date, and make some recommendations to those struggling with the issue as well as to those who are involved with providing pastoral care.

What does the Bible say:

Old Testament

In order to understand what the Bible says on any subject it is necessary to first understand the larger themes that inform our understanding of God's plans for humanity before coming to the specific texts that relate to the topic. Genesis 1:27 records that "God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them". While every human being is made in the image of God, there is a unique sense in which men and women as different sexes reflect different aspects of God's nature and as they come together in marriage they reflect his nature more completely. Masculinity and femininity are gifts from God to be enjoyed and treasured. There was always meant to be a distinction between men and women.

In Genesis 2 God institutes marriage. The woman is planned as someone who is "just right for him" and marriage is described as taking place when "a man leaves his mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one". Marriage is therefore a union of a man and a woman and sex is the physical expression of this union. Penis and vagina are beautifully designed to reflect this complementarity.

In Genesis 3, we read of the fall of humanity into sin. The effects of sin are reflected in the created order. Human bodies will slowly deteriorate. Paul explains this effect in Romans 8. "Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay...for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. Sin has permeated our hearts, minds and bodies. Our desires are no longer reliable indicators of God's plan for us and they may lead us into disaster.

Because of this fallibility and in order to give his people an objective standard by which to know his will, God gave to Moses a body of instructions known as "the law". This is where we come to the first biblical instructions regarding homosexuality. Leviticus 20:13 reads "If a man practises 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 offense". At first glance this seems plain enough, but Leviticus also contains many other instructions, such as forbidding the wearing of clothing woven from two different kinds of thread, and the question arises as to which instructions, if any, are valid for us today. Some Christians have taken the view that if we ignore the instructions relating to mixed thread garments there is no logical reason to take the moral commandments as binding for today.

This may seem reasonable until we examine the examples of Paul and Jesus. In I Corinthians 5, Paul is dealing with a case of incest in the church. Jesus made no pronouncements on the subject of incest, but Paul is in no doubt that it constitutes sexual immorality. How does he know? Paul is well versed in the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 20. A second case in point is seen in Matt 15, where Jesus is debating the morality of the way that parents are treated by their children. He quotes from Leviticus 20, referring to it as the commandments of God. It is clear that both Jesus and Paul regarded some parts of Leviticus as binding for those under the new covenant. It is possible to delineate which parts of the Law are binding for today by asking three questions.

1. **What does the New Testament say on the matter?** If the New Testament makes it plain that certain ceremonial laws were a foreshadowing of a spiritual reality which is fulfilled in Jesus then these commandments are no longer binding. If the New Testament teaching reinforces an issue then it most certainly is binding.
2. **Were there any exceptions made?** If there were exceptions made, this would indicate the lesser importance of the instruction. Tabernacle curtains were woven from two types of cloth, which seems to indicate that this was not a major issue, but a symbolic representation of the fact that the nation of Israel was called to be separate from the surrounding pagan cultures and that intermarriage with them was forbidden.
3. **What was the penalty for disobedience?** More minor regulations relating to symbols of separation such as fields sown with two types of seed carried minor penalties. Infringements that carried the death penalty certainly revealed the seriousness of the issue in God's mind.

The Levitical prohibitions on homosexuality are all repeated in the New Testament and no exceptions are made. In fact all the references in scripture that concern homosexual practise refer to it as sin. There are no exceptions made. The death penalty was prescribed for violations of this commandment, indicating the seriousness of the offense.

A second question needs to be asked concerning the penalties. If some of these commands are pertinent, why do we not apply the death penalty for their infringement? There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the nation of Israel was a political entity with the power to enact and enforce civil laws. However, when Jesus came, God changed his method of revelation from a nation to a person, Jesus Christ, who would in turn initiate and sustain an organism, called the church. The church should be separate from the state and does not have the power to impose civil law. The question needs to be asked as to whether they should impose the penalty if they had the ability to do so? The answer is no, they should not and the reason is that Jesus also ushered in an era of grace. When Jesus was presented with the woman caught in adultery, the law indicated that she (and the man involved) should have been put to death. With the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus came to call sinners to repentance, and to a new life within the community of the church. Dead People cannot repent. Jesus instructed people that he dealt with to leave their life of sin. He was not condoning their behaviour, God's opinion of it had not changed, but Jesus was to receive the death sentence in the place of guilty sinners.

New Testament

The Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality are repeated in the New Testament. In Roman 1, Paul explains God's anger at sin. He describes the descent into idolatry and then explains "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".

Some have argued that this sin took place within the context of idolatry and that this has no bearing on committed homosexual relationships. Paul goes on to mention a number of other sins; envy, murder etc. One would not consider this acceptable behaviour simply because the context of idolatry was removed. A further argument has been advanced that these were heterosexuals who had adopted unnatural (for them) homosexual practices. However, the text teaches that these things were unnatural in the sense of being against nature ie the created order. In this passage we see lesbianism mentioned for the first time. Perhaps this was more of a problem in the Gentile culture than in the Hebrew culture.

Paul repeats his teaching on the sinfulness of homosexual acts in I Corinthians 6:1-10. "Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practise homosexuality, or are thieves, or are greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people - none of these will inherit the kingdom God". The same idea occurs in I Tim 1:10 "The law is for people who are sexually immoral, or who practise 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 Greek word used in these passages *Arsenokoite* is translated as those who "practise homosexuality". It is a term coined by Paul that only occurs in Christian literature. Gay apologists have suggested that it related only to homosexual prostitution. However it is derived from the Greek translation (Septuagint) of the verses previously referred to in Leviticus. This translation uses the term *arseno* which was used to describe a man when there was a particular need to emphasize his maleness and *Koite* which means bed but used in a sexual connotation. Paul seems to have coined this term as an allusion back to the Levitical text and to avoid any confusion about his meaning. It is clear therefore that the New Testament endorses the view expressed in Leviticus, and that scripture consistently condemns homosexual practise.

Conclusion regarding Biblical view of Homosexual Practise

Scripture consistently condemns homosexual practise as sin.

What does science say?

It is important in considering what Science says to understand a few basic premises. A scientific fact is not established unless several other researchers come to the same conclusions when they repeat the research. Errors in research can occur when the selection of the sample is biased by choosing

people for the research who are selected from particular groups rather than randomly sampling the population that is being studied.

Prevalence of Homosexuality

A lot of the research done has been based on the American population. A figure of 10% is often bandied about supposedly based on the Kinsey report. However Kinsey's sample was biased in that it oversampled prison inmates many of whom were sex offenders, as well as members of gay affirming organizations. More credible research shows that the rate of homosexuality as a consistent lifestyle for males is less than 3% and for women less than 2%. (Jones and Yarhouse:2000). One of the difficulties in working out prevalence is in defining what actually constitutes homosexuality. Is it a one off experience or a consistent lifestyle? There is a sense in which prevalence is irrelevant as the morality of an action is unaffected by whether it is common or rare. However, Christians are often pressurized to change their stance on the presumption that it is common. It is also interesting to note that those who identify themselves as homosexual are more commonly found in urban areas.

Causes of Homosexuality

In some senses, the causes of homosexuality are irrelevant. Even if the causes of homosexuality are shown in the future to have strong biological influence, this would not change the moral stance of the church. The Fall of humanity into sin has resulted in imperfect bodies which are deteriorating. If paedophilia were shown to have a biological basis, this would not mean that we would condone it. Problems such as anger and addictions may also be influenced by biological factors but this does not mean that we simply accept them. However, causation is very relevant from a pastoral point of view as we try to help people struggling with these issues.

Biological Theories

Studies have shown that gender non conformity in childhood does predispose to homosexuality. This could mean that there are biological or environmental factors at work but has stimulated research into biological areas.

1. Hormones

- a. At one stage it was proposed that hormonal levels are different in adult homosexuals as opposed to heterosexuals. This theory is untrue and has been discredited.
2. Another proposal is that the hormones to which the baby is exposed in utero are different. A few cases have been studied where hormones were unwittingly given in high doses during pregnancy. The resulting abnormalities did include alterations in gender identity and sexual functioning but the other abnormalities far exceeded anything seen in the homosexual population. It is not clear whether these results can be extrapolated to the general homosexual population.

3. Genetic Studies

- a. Twin studies – These studies look at identical twins who have exactly the same genetic material and try to see how many pairs there are where both twins are homosexual as compared to the number of pairs where only one twin is homosexual. If sexual orientation is defined by genes in the same way that eye colour is defined by genes one would expect that if one identical twin was gay the other one would also be gay. Research in this area is difficult in terms of defining what homosexual means. Are you homosexual if you had one homosexual experience at school? It is also complicated by the fact that both twins grow up in similar environments and may have been affected by the same environmental factors. The most famous study of this kind was done by Bailey and Pillard in 1991. They reported a 52% concordance rate for the twins studied. This study was trumpeted in the press as proving that homosexuality was genetic in origin. However there was sampling bias in that the twin pairs were recruited from the gay community. A repeat study using the Australian twin registry was done which showed that in 11% of the pairs, both siblings were homosexual. Many websites still use the 52% figure. Other studies have been done on different twin populations with varying results. What is clear is that you do not inherit a specific gene that guarantees that you will be homosexual.
- b. Direct Chromosomal studies- These studies look directly at the genetic material. A study by Hamer in 1993 found a chromosomal marker which occurred more frequently in families with homosexual brothers and mothers. This marker was hailed as the “Gay gene”. However they also found non homosexual brothers who carried this marker. Other researchers did not manage to replicate their findings. Further research may clarify this issue. It is possible that a marker of this kind may be inherited. It may influence the inheritance of temperament, which could predispose an individual to homosexuality in the presence of other factors.

4. Anatomical Brain Structure This research has looked at differences in sizes of some areas of the brain between heterosexuals and homosexuals. So far it has not been conclusive, with conflicting results by different researchers, and some findings not repeated by other researchers. It is also plagued by difficulties in defining who is homosexual.

5. Other anatomical features Studies have been done on finger length, eye blink reactions, ridges in fingerprints. Some have shown increased numbers of homosexuals with certain features but again it is not conclusive, as other people with the same features are not homosexual.

Psychological/Environmental Theories

1. Distant Father/ Overinvolved Mother – some research to support this but flawed by methodology. The theory is that a young boy who is emotionally detached from his father develops an overly close relationship with his mother and starts to identify with her instead

of his father. Homosexual relationships are a way to satisfy the craving for male attention. This could work in reverse for women.

2. Childhood sexual experience- There is a higher incidence of homosexuality in people reporting sexual abuse as children. Not hard to imagine that a girl abused by her father or other male may grow to hate men. If the experience of sexual abuse is same sex and pleasurable which it can be, it could set patterns of sexual attraction. Not determinative as many sexually abused children do not become homosexual.
3. Exotic becomes erotic theory- This theory proposes that being raised with the majority of your time spent with children of your same sex results in the other sex assuming an exotic status which makes for sexual attraction. Children who mix with peers of predominantly the other sex, start to view their own sex as exotic and therefore develop same sex arousal.

Conclusions Regarding Causes of Homosexuality

There are no simple answers as to what causes homosexuality. It is likely that a variety of biological, environmental, and psychological factors converge with human choice to produce homosexuality.

What are the implications for Christians struggling with same sex attractions?

Is change possible?

Stanton Jones, Professor of Psychology at Wheaton University makes this comment:

“Anyone who says that there is no hope for change is either ignorant or a liar. Every secular study of change has shown some success rate and persons who testify to substantial healings by God are legion” (Dallas:122)

Many people have made successful transitions to heterosexual relationships, but there are some who have never been able to feel sexually attracted to the opposite sex and marriage would be very unwise. That raises the question of whether God would ask someone to remain celibate. Some Christians feel that God would never ask that of any one, but the truth is that God often does ask us to do difficult things. Heterosexual Christians may also be asked to relinquish marriage. This could happen if there is no Christian for them to marry, if they are divorced for reasons that preclude remarriage, and some people are called to remain single so that they can serve God better. Both Jesus and Paul were role models for singleness, and modelled lives of meaning and purpose. The truth is that being a Christian is difficult. Jesus makes no apology for the fact that some will have to die for their faith. Mark 8:34 records Jesus as saying “ If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me”. The wonderful thing about being a Christian is that this life is not all there is. In fact it’s over quite quickly. One day we will all receive new bodies and be done with all the trouble of this world. Those who have been obedient and faithful to God will receive their reward.

What should be the response of the church? The first thing that comes to mind is that the church in general has often been guilty of homophobia and confession is the appropriate response for the times when homosexual people have been the subject of ridicule and aggression. These types of reactions are never appropriate. All sin is wrong and the church needs to deal with people struggling

with the issue of homosexuality in the same way that it deals with heterosexual sin and not single homosexual sin out for special attention. Thirdly the church needs to welcome all single people more actively into cell groups and families, recognising the need for community. It is not enough to tell people to be celibate. We must provide opportunities for friendship. Finally we need to hold firmly to our understanding that God has set the parameters for all sexual relationships for our good, for the good of society and for His glory.

Dr Ruth Ward Aug 2010

Quotations from New Living Translation

Dallas J 2007 The Gay Gospel Harvest House Publishers:Oregon

Jones S. L Yarhouse M 2000 Homosexuality The Use of Scientific research in the Church's Moral Debate IVP Academic, Illinois.

Please regard this article as a work under construction. If you would like to make any comments, please email the author at drruthward@gmail.com If you would like to discuss any of the issues, Ruth is available at the counselling centre 011-7846214

A very helpful website is found at www.exodusinternational.org