

The Bible and Homosexuality

J. Glen Taylor

J. Glen Taylor is an Associate Professor of OT at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto.

Preamble

The role of the Bible in addressing the modern question of the place of the homosexual in the church is complex. The nature of a biblical perspective will invariably be affected by the questions posed of the Bible, by the particular hermeneutic employed, and by the unavoidable perspective which every student (or scholar) brings to his or her reading of the Bible. In writing this essay, I hope to ask some of the right questions and to be fair to the views of others concerning this important issue which is pressing hard on the church and on the consciences of Christian people in various parts of the world.

Clarifications

First, the term 'homosexuality' (and also the term 'homosexual') will be avoided in the biblical portion of this essay in preference for a more awkward cluster of words like 'homosexual relations'. This odd change in terminology is necessary because, as P.D.M. Turner notes, the term 'homosexuality' does not match well with the way in which the Bible itself addresses the issue.¹ Turner's point is that 'homosexuality' can refer to a condition or inclination apart from the acting-out of sexual relations, whereas the Bible does not recognize this distinction but normally speaks rather in terms of actual same-sex sexual relations.²

Second, in view of the danger to which the church has often succumbed, that of showing insensitivity towards chaste persons of homosexual orientation,³ it is important to clarify that the issue for the Christian is *not* whether persons with homosexual orientation should be welcomed into the fellowship of the church – let us never forget that Christ died for all – but whether sexual relations between homosexuals are ever appropriate and, if so, on what terms. Because conduct and not orientation is the real issue, the purpose of this essay is to ask whether the Bible considers homosexual relations to be sinful. If the answer suggested by biblical reflection is 'yes', even when the case of covenanted Christians of homosexual orientation is considered, then the homosexual person accepted by God in Christ could no more engage in this activity than any other faithful Christian could in other forms of sin. The perspective of the Bible – indisputably authoritative in matters of Christian faith and practice – is thus crucial; it plays a primary role in determining the context and terms within which Christ is calling the church to minister faithfully to persons of homosexual orientation.

Because the Bible nowhere directly answers the question concerning the modern phenomenon of a person with homosexual orientation seeking to be involved in a covenanted relationship, we must first ask what the Bible says in response to questions raised about homosexual relations in ancient times, and then we must ask how what the Bible says may be applied to the modern situation. We begin, however, with a brief consideration of the background against which these questions must be raised, the general tenor of Scripture as a whole.

The general tenor of Scripture

The issue of homosexual relations and the Bible cannot simply be addressed with reference to the half-dozen or so passages that have at least traditionally been understood as condemning homosexual intercourse; otherwise, we might be guilty of 'proof

texting'. Rather, we must ask: In which direction *on the whole* do the biblical winds blow with respect to appropriate sexual expression between persons? By virtually any notion of the 'literal sense' of the Bible, these winds blow in the direction of heterosexual marriage, with affirmation being given to celibacy alone as an alternative. This is so from Genesis to Song of Songs to Revelation, through well over a millennium of Scripture writing and in both the OT and the NT. The rapidly evolving dominance of heterosexual relations within the context of a monogamous nuclear family is unmistakable; quite simply, heterosexual relations (or, in their place, celibacy) are the only options which appear to receive approval in the Bible. Thus, unlike the ministry of women or the notion of freedom from slavery, no biblical winds blow in the direction of same-sex relations that similarly invite re-evaluation of passages traditionally considered a problem for such a view. (It is nonetheless important to re-examine the traditional passages to see if they are indeed condemnatory of homosexual relations as has traditionally been thought, a point to which we shall return.)

The account of creation is a prime example of the predominant biblical affirmation of heterosexual marriage. In Genesis 1:27-28, humanity in the form of both male and female is created in the 'image of God'. In Genesis 2 the Lord creates woman, God's specially selected emotional and physical counterpart to the man, and the two – the 'ish and the 'ishâ – become 'one flesh'. Within the canonical context of the preceding chapter, this 'wedding' is not just a union, but a re-union of humanity created in the image of God. Just as Genesis 1 ends with a declaration that the order of creation involving the creation of man and woman is 'very good', Genesis 2 ends with the climactic statement that the woman is the reason why a man leaves his own father and mother, to become 'one flesh' with his wife (Gn. 2:24).⁴ If the powerful affirmation of heterosexual relations as the carefully planned order of creation in these two introductory chapters of the Bible is not striking to the modern Christian reader, it certainly was to the writer(s) of the Holiness Code and to St Paul (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27); indeed, the doctrine of creation articulated in these early chapters of Genesis seems to be at the heart of the Bible's uniformly negative attitude towards same-sex sexual relations.

Some scholars have suggested that a few passages in Scripture constitute an important exception to the idea that heterosexual relations alone are appropriate in the Bible. For example, Tom Horner maintains that David and Jonathan and Naomi and Ruth respectively had possible homosexual relations, and he even goes so far as to suggest that Jesus and Paul had homosexual traits.⁵ Leaving aside the Christological issue that the suggested case of Christ would present, V.P. Furnish is almost certainly correct that 'our sources simply do not provide the data to support such ideas'.⁶ Similarly, the relative infrequency with which the Bible mentions homosexual relationships, and the possible silence of Jesus on the issue,⁷ do not suggest that these relationships were relatively unimportant to biblical writers or to Jesus, as is sometimes maintained.⁸ Rather, the phenomenon of relative silence probably reflects the fact that homosexual relations were not a major issue in the early church, most likely because it shared the perspective of Hellenistic Judaism that sexual relations of this kind were sinful. In sum, one searches the Bible in vain for the suggestion that homosexual relations were a viable option for the faithful.

With this general perspective in mind, we now turn to consider the passages which specifically make reference or allusion to homosexual sex. Our approach will be to survey a range of exegetical options (both traditional and revisionist), and to assess the feasibility of the various options offered.

Passages traditionally considered to condemn homosexual relationships

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 19, Judges 19

These well-known stories recount incidents in which the male citizenry of a town (Sodom and Gibeah respectively) proposes to have intercourse with a male visitor (or, in Gn. 19, visitors).

D.S. Bailey's attempt to interpret the verb 'know' in Genesis 19:5 as meaning something other than sexual knowledge⁹ is untenable in light of verse 7, in which Lot's daughters are offered as an alternative to the men.¹⁰ Homosexual relations are clearly in view here and they are almost certainly construed negatively. The *type* of homosexual union negatively construed, however, is far from what is typical today (it is homosexual *gang rape*, which is no less abhorrent to most modern-day homosexuals than to heterosexuals), and the broader context which concerns a breach of Eastern hospitality is at least partly involved in the negative construal.¹¹

A few considerations from the broader context are also relevant. Because Genesis 19 has parallels with Genesis 6:1-4, which concerns 'unnatural' relations between angels and humans, it is probably important for the story that the sexual sins of Sodom also be understood as unnatural; they are, in fact, doubly so, since the sexual relations proposed are with visitors who are both men and angels. Moreover, as Gordon Wenham notes, just as the story of unnatural relations between angels and humans in Genesis 6 is followed by a judgment involving destruction (the flood), so too the unnatural relations proposed in Genesis 19 are followed by a parallel judgment involving destruction (the downpouring of fire and brimstone).¹² In sum, although set within a particularly abhorrent context, the homosexual nature of the relations proposed forms part of the basis upon which the judgment is made that the people of Sodom were 'wicked, great sinners before the Lord' (Gn. 13:13), and thus deserving of destruction.

As an important corrective to those who might judge the sin of Sodom to be homosexual relations alone, Bailey and others rightly point out that the Bible on the whole interprets the sin of Sodom very broadly to include things other than homosexual intercourse, such as pride and insensitivity to the poor (Ezk. 16:49-50; cf. Is. 3:9). This does not mean, however, that the sexual dimension (*i.e.* involving unnatural relations) is ignored in the biblical witness; important here is Jude 7, which refers to Sodom's indulgence in 'unnatural lusts', and 2 Peter 2:6 which mentions Lot's oppression by the 'sensual conduct of unprincipled men'.¹³ Of course, only at a later period does Sodom become a byword specifically for homosexual (or bestial) relations.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

As Wenham notes, because Leviticus 18:22 uses the very general term *zākir*, 'male', the passage clearly prohibits every kind of male-male intercourse (were the word *na'ar*, 'youth', used instead, presumably only pederasty would be condemned).¹⁴ These homosexual relations are further described by the very strong word *tō'ebā*, 'abomination'.¹⁵ In Leviticus 20:13 the penalty for offenders is death, putting the offence on a par with adultery (20:10) or the worst cases of incest (20:11, 12).¹⁶ Moreover, three factors make it clear that the sexual relationship here condemned involved mutual consent between two males: (1) both parties are punished; (2) the verb used is simply 'lie' (as opposed to, say, 'seize and lie' which would imply rape); and (3) the further comment is made, 'their blood be upon their own heads', which suggests an awareness of the action and its consequences.¹⁷ Thus, unlike Egypt where only pederasty was condemned or Mesopotamia where apparently only forcible homosexual relations were forbidden, OT law appears to forbid *all forms* of homosexual relations.¹⁸ Wenham's explanation is probably correct that 'it therefore seems most likely that Israel's repudiation of homosexual intercourse arises out of its doctrine of creation'.¹⁹

Some scholars cast these passages from Leviticus in a very different light, however. For example, it is sometimes maintained that the context for the homosexuality referred to in Leviticus is cultic prostitution within a pagan Canaanite shrine

and that the biblical writer is thus concerned more with idolatry than with homosexuality.²⁰ In support of this view it is sometimes claimed that the term *tō'ebā*, 'abomination', is a highly specific word that points toward a religious concern for cultic purity in relation to the other nations and their gods.²¹ What is in view, so the argument goes, is cultic prostitution in which the participants attempt to procure fertility and fecundity by sympathetic magic through ritual sex acts, as is thought to have taken place in Canaanite culture. In short, the problem is not homosexual relations but their pagan, often idolatrous context(s).²² Which of these perspectives is correct?

The weight of evidence at present seems clearly to favour the former construal. Recent OT scholarship questions seriously the extent to which the traditional model for understanding cultic prostitution was in evidence at all either in Canaan or in Israel.²³ Moreover, it is clear from the use of the term 'abomination' elsewhere in the Bible and in other literature that an abomination could refer generally to various things abhorrent to God and that it could even refer to practices of the Gentiles, in which case the word cannot be limited to a specific concern within Hebrew religion for purity in relation to other nations.²⁴ Thus, given the uncertainties concerning this narrower understanding of the context and the clear generality of the condemnation of men lying with men, the view of Wenham that all forms of homosexual relations are condemned seems preferable.

A problem still possibly remains with these passages, namely their applicability to a setting in the NT and beyond to our own day. For example, on what grounds should the law concerning homosexuality be upheld and the law concerning intercourse with a woman during menstruation, mentioned in the same context, be dismissed?²⁵ Though alien to the OT itself and difficult to sustain, the theological distinction between moral laws which are binding and ceremonial, ritual, and civil laws which are not, has long been upheld in Christian tradition (note for example Article 7 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion).²⁶ The problem in the present case is nonetheless mitigated significantly by the fact that the OT attitude to homosexuality is picked up and carried into the NT, which clearly has binding authority for Christians.²⁷ Certainly, early Christian writers considered the levitical laws concerning homosexual intercourse to be relevant to the issue of sexual behaviour in their own day, a point denied by Boswell but convincingly reaffirmed by Wright.²⁸

Summary

To summarize, the attitude towards male homosexual relations in the OT is uniformly negative. Contrary to some current thinking, the relevant passages in Leviticus do not appear to condemn homosexual relations for their associations with prostitution within the context of an idolatrous heathen cult.²⁹ Thus, unlike other societies in the Ancient Near East, this negative construal within Hebrew society seems to apply to all forms of homosexual intercourse. Homosexual sex between men was termed an 'abomination' (something abhorrent to God), for which the prescribed legal penalty was so severe as to function as a strong deterrent. The explanation for this apparently blanket condemnation of homosexual unions is almost certainly to be found in the Hebrew understanding of creation, according to which the divinely ordained context for human sexuality takes place between a man and his wife. Together, the male and the female reflect the image of God, and their union, alone deemed natural in the created order, ensures procreation and the formation of a nuclear family.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Romans 1:26-27

Romans 1:26-27 is clearly the most important passage on homosexual intercourse in the NT. The broad context is summarized succinctly by Robin Scroggs: 'Since the entire world, both Jew and Gentile, is guilty of sin, grace (salvation) is entirely God's gift and extends equally to Jew and Gentile.'³⁰

The more immediate context is Paul's story of how the world came to be guilty of sin; it is Paul's 'story of the universal fall'.³¹ Paul argues that humanity committed the primal sin of rebellion against God by failing to acknowledge God as creator

and instead turned to idolatry, the worship of created things. As a consequence or punishment for the sin of abandoning the worship of God in favour of the worship of things in nature, 'God handed them [humanity] over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves...' (Rom. 1:24-25).

How do the depravities in verses 24-31, including specific mention of homosexual relations in verses 26-27, contribute to Paul's argument? According to the exhaustive treatment of Hays, the depravities function in two ways: (a) 'First of all, when the text is read with literal precision, these various forms of "base mind" and "improper conduct" are seen to be *manifestations* (not provocations) of the wrath of God, punishments inflicted upon rebellious humanity... rather like the plagues visited upon the Egyptians in Exodus'; and (b) 'At the same time, the heaping-up of depravities also serves to warrant Paul's evaluation of humanity as deeply implicated in "ungodliness and wickedness" (1:18b)'.³² The depravities point to the conclusion that 'the refusal to acknowledge God as creator ends in blind distortion of the creation'.³³

It is probably safe to say that no NT scholar denies that the passage presents homosexual relations as an obvious sinful distortion of God's original intention for creation.³⁴ Moreover, a majority of these scholars maintain that the reference to homosexual relations in Romans 1:26-27 is not to homosexual cultic prostitution, but rather to homosexual (including lesbian) sex in general; as even Boswell admits at one point, 'it is clear that the sexual behavior itself is objectionable to Paul, not merely its [cultic] associations'.³⁵ However, as Hays has conclusively demonstrated in his lengthy rebuttal of the late Yale historian, Boswell is far from correct in going on to conclude, (a) that Paul's words are not applicable to persons of homosexual orientation (Boswell, McNeill, and others maintain that Paul refers to heterosexual people unnaturally 'exchanging' heterosexual³⁶ for homosexual unions), and (b) that 'contrary to nature' means not immoral but merely 'unexpected, unusual, or different from what would occur in the normal order of things'.³⁷ Contrary to Boswell, the 'exchange', for Paul, is between the natural course of things such as worshipping God instead of idols, and heterosexual union instead of homosexual union, and *para physin* means not simply 'unusual', but 'contrary to nature'. Hays puts Paul's concept bluntly: 'those who indulge in sexual practices *para physin* are defying the creator and demonstrating their own alienation from him'.³⁸

Nevertheless, in much contemporary reflection upon Romans 1, scholars differ about the abiding hermeneutical significance of Paul's argument that homosexual acts are 'contrary to nature'. For example, because Paul's argument is not original, but is in fact closely paralleled in the Graeco-Roman philosophers and in literary texts, Furnish seems to imply that Paul's assumption that homosexual relations are 'contrary to nature' is not of abiding significance but reflects simply the common (Stoic) wisdom of the day which is subject to reinterpretation in our own day.³⁹ However, although Furnish is right that Paul's teaching here has clear parallels, Furnish does not emphasize sufficiently well an important aspect of the discussion, namely that Hellenistic Jewish writers such as Philo and Josephus – and, significantly, Paul – recognized a parallel between the secular Hellenistic notion that what was 'unnatural' was wrong and the OT teaching of the Law of Moses in which all forms of intercourse between males were 'unnatural' because they were contrary to the order of the world as designed by God the creator (see the discussion of Lev. 20:13; 18:22 above). Significantly then, only when the reference to God as creator and the clear allusions to the creation story in Genesis 1-3 are ignored or significantly downplayed (as in the works of William Countryman, Scroggs and Furnish for example)⁴⁰ can Paul's clear teaching that homosexual union is 'unnatural' plausibly be regarded as culturally conditioned and thus of very limited (or no) relevance for the modern issue of homosexual relations and the church.

A few additional points about Romans 1 ought to be made in order to avoid misunderstanding Paul. None of what Paul states in this passage offers support of any kind for singling out homosexual intercourse as if this alone constituted a perversion of God's natural order. Nor is Paul's primary intention here to offer Christians instruction on ethical matters (although his teaching has ethical implications). Moreover, Paul's discussion of homosexual intercourse, though poignant and important,

plays a fairly modest role as illustrating one of the vices that is both the consequence and evidence of humanity's rebellion against God. In light of Romans 2:1, from which it is clear that all of humankind stands without excuse before God, it would be inappropriately self-righteous for anyone to condemn homosexual relations as if these relations were not evidence of a sinful rebellion in which all persons participate. To miss this would be to miss Paul's point entirely.

1 Corinthians 6:9

In this passage, Paul considers taking another person to court to be appropriate only for 'the unrighteous' (i.e. unbelievers), which the Corinthian Christians once were but no longer are. To highlight the inconsistency of their present behaviour and to remind them that unbelievers have no share in God's kingdom, Paul recalls the unbelieving past of the Corinthians, rooted in the paganism of being, among other things, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.⁴¹ Wrongly translated together in the RSV as 'homosexuals', how should these words be translated? The word *malakos* means literally 'soft' but is used here substantively in the sense of 'a male performing the female role in homosexual relations'.⁴²

There is more confusion concerning the meaning of *arsenokoitēs* than in the case of *malakos*. Scroggs states that the first word-element, *arsen*, means 'men', and the second, *koitai*, means 'bed', so 'marriage-bed', then sexual intercourse in general.⁴³ He suggests that the second component likely has a verbal force and that the first is an objective noun.⁴⁴ He translates *arsenokoitēs* as 'lying (with) a male', or 'one who lies with a male', translations which Turner similarly advocates.⁴⁵ According to Boswell, however, the first word-element is subjective (i.e. 'male' describes the gender of the one engaged in the sexual activity and not the object of it), and the second word-element is a coarse term for 'a person who, by insertion, takes the "active" role in intercourse'.⁴⁶ In other words, according to Boswell, in using the term *arsenokoitēs*, Paul is not referring to a "homosexual" or even a "sodomite" but to 'male sexual agents, i.e., active male prostitutes'.⁴⁷

Boswell's view that *arsenokoitēs* refers to a male prostitute has been convincingly refuted by Wright who demonstrates that the term means 'a man who lies (with a man)'.⁴⁸ In fact, according to Wright and others (Turner, for example, and to a certain extent Scroggs as well), the real inspiration for *arsenokoitai* appears to come directly from the LXX version of the laws concerning homosexual expression in Leviticus 18 and 20 in which the words *arsēn* and *koitē* both occur.⁴⁹ Turner draws the following conclusions:

Probably, then, the compound, whether chosen or coined in I Cor., is intended to evoke the Holiness Code with its emphasis on male penetration of the male. Actually as a Biblical Hellenist and Hebraist I should put it more strongly; in the absence of earlier attestation, a deliberate, conscious back-reference by the Apostle is as certain as philology can make it. (He may or may not have known that he was dropping into 'translationese'.) Fascinatingly, by avoiding the available *paiderastēs*, he [Paul] sees to it that 'loving, consensual, adult relations' are fully covered.⁵⁰

Significantly, then, *arsenokoitai* appears to be a Pauline invention, a direct allusion in the NT to the 'all-inclusive' condemnation of homosexual relations found in the laws of Leviticus.

As with the passages concerning homosexual relations in Leviticus, it has been argued that Paul's condemnation of homosexual relations both here and in 1 Timothy 1:10 refers only to pagan ritual practice. In response to this, it must be noted that there is nothing in the context that requires (or even strongly suggests) so specific an application. Certainly the background in the Greek text of Leviticus for *arsenokoitai* offers no support for this. Moreover, based on his judgment that *pornoi* must mean 'at least male prostitutes' in 1 Timothy 1:10 and 1 Corinthians 6:9, Turner states:

The clinching refutation of the argument that Paul's condemnation of both kinds of male homosexual act[s]⁵¹ refers only to heathen ritual practice is that, in both N.T. passages, precisely the 'prostitute-inclusive' word⁵² is listed separately, as we have seen. As for the idea that the Fathers condemned only the identical heathen cult-prostitution, as there were no other people who performed such acts, there is no evidence for it. Even if there was evidence, the Greek Fathers would still have called the activity itself sinful.⁵³

The broader context of 1 Corinthians 6:9 offers two important additional points of relevance to the issue of homosexual relations. First, through Christ's justification and washing, the lifestyles of unbelief cited earlier in the passage must no longer characterize the Christian (v. 11). Second, Paul goes on to argue that a Christian's body, now part of Christ's own body and a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit, should not be united with a prostitute, since intercourse involves becoming 'one flesh' with the other person. My point is that there is an operating principle here that is relevant to homosexual relations as well as to inappropriate heterosexual relations: since part of the body of Christ himself is united with another in a Christian's sexual union, that union must be holy, which homosexual intercourse evidently is not.

To summarize the discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:9: *malakos*, 'catamite', refers to the man who plays the passive (female) role in homosexual intercourse, and *arsenokoitēs*, 'sodomite', which invokes the language of the laws against homosexual relations in the LXX of Leviticus, refers to a man who lies with another man. By referring to the passive role as well as to the more general *arsenokoitēs*, by referring earlier to *pornoi* which likely already covered the case of male prostitution, and by not using more confining terms such as the term for pederasty (*paiderastēs*), Paul seems to be offering a comprehensive (i.e. non-context-specific) condemnation of homosexual intercourse. Moreover there is nothing to suggest that Paul's condemnation of homosexual relations is based on cultic or ritual connections with these relations. The broader context helps to make it clear that relations of this kind are incompatible with membership in the body of Christ.

1 Timothy 1:10

In 1 Timothy 1:10, *arsenokoitēs* appears again, this time in a list that describes the kind of people for whom the law is useful in offering correction. The logic is that the law addresses issues of relevance primarily for the sinner, an example being the murderer who is thus told, 'thou shalt not commit murder', etc.

Scroggs suggests that groups of words in this list of vices belong together and that the words *pornos*, *arsenokoitēs* and *andrapodistēs* seem to be a grouping. When seen in relation to each other, the best translation, according to Scroggs, is 'male prostitutes, males who lie [with them], and slave dealers [who procure them]'.⁵⁴ On this view, then, we have the same situation here as in 1 Corinthians 6:9 where another word or series of words affects the meaning of the more general term *arsenokoitēs* such that it becomes linked specifically with homosexual prostitution.

To evaluate: at least some of the words that describe similar sorts of sins are indeed grouped together in this list, but on what basis? Scroggs argues that the law of verse 8 is possibly civil and that the words in verses 9-10 are grouped together according to the categories of crimes against civil government ('lawless', 'rebellious'); then against religious law ('impious', 'sinner', 'unholy', 'profane'); then against various forms of murder ('patricide', 'matricide', 'murder'), etc. But commentators more often argue that the law in verse 8 is the law of Moses, and that at least the words in the latter part of the list – including those relevant to our discussion – are grouped in relation to the Ten Commandments.⁵⁵ On this understanding, the list beginning with 'patricide' and 'matricide' refers to extreme violations against the fifth commandment (to honour one's parents); 'murder' applies to the sixth commandment; 'fornicators'⁵⁶ and 'sodomites' refers to the seventh commandment concerning adultery; 'kidnappers' refers to the eighth commandment concerning stealing,⁵⁷ and 'liars' and 'perjurers' refers to the ninth commandment concerning bearing false witness.

What are the implications of this for the meaning of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Timothy 1:10? Given the meaning of the word as applicable to homosexual relations in general (and not male prostitution in particular, as argued earlier), its occurrence together with the general term *pornoi* (which quite possibly already covers the case of male prostitution), and its function together with *pornoi* as illustrative of breaches of the seventh commandment, *arsenokoitai* appears again not to be linked in its context to homosexual prostitution or pederasty, but to homosexual relations in general. For these and other reasons,⁵⁸ the view of Scroggs that the writer likely refers to something like a group of co-conspirators in a same-sex ring is clearly less likely than the view that the words reflect their more natural

meanings of 'fornicators', 'men who lie with men', and 'slave dealers' respectively.

The applicability of the biblical witness

Up to this point, we have been concerned with what the Bible states concerning homosexual relations. It remains to be asked: how does what the Bible says apply in our own day? As noted earlier, the question is particularly important since the Bible nowhere deals directly with the issue of a Christian of homosexual orientation seeking to be united sexually in a covenant relationship with a partner of the same sex.

Evidence adduced in this paper suggests that one must differ with those who argue that there is little or no impediment in the way of condoning covenanted homosexual Christian unions on the ground that the Bible condemns only exploitative or idolatrous forms of homosexual relations such as pederasty or male cultic prostitution. There is no clear evidence for this view. Homosexual intercourse *itself* is condemned in the OT primarily on the basis of the doctrine of creation and this view is upheld in the NT within the theologically substantive discussion of what is 'contrary to nature' in Romans 1. Most likely, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 similarly refer to homosexual relations in general (i.e. they do not allude only to a specific type of homosexual relationship such as homosexual prostitution or pederasty).⁵⁹

How does this apply to the modern situation involving homosexual relations between committed partners? Since the condemnation of homosexual relations in the Bible can nowhere necessarily be identified with or limited to the particularly heinous moral or ritual contexts in which these relations allegedly occurred, the fact that the modern-day context is different (i.e. non-exploitative, non-ritualistic, etc.) is not directly relevant, since the Bible seems to condemn the act of homosexual intercourse *itself* as inherently sinful.

The issue of homosexual relations within the modern church may be addressed further in relation to the church's traditional forms of authority: Scripture, tradition, reason and (according to some) experience.⁶⁰ Concerning Scripture, an avenue of recourse yet unexplored in this paper is the invocation of general principles (such as 'all our actions should be guided by love'), or analogy (such as 'just as the early church accepted Gentiles, so we should accept [sexually active] homosexuals').⁶¹ Those who argue along these lines are often at odds with those who invoke specific biblical laws (Lev. 18:22; 20:13) or who appeal to Paul's authoritative and unambiguous depiction of the human condition in Romans 1. In this regard, Hays' response is apt: 'Whatever one may decide about the weight of the appeal to the love-principle . . . the fact remains that no biblical text directly contradicts the authority of Paul's teaching on this matter.'⁶² It could of course be added that other passages seem in fact to support it, and that providing a sanctioned context in which an inherently sinful act may be given free rein cannot ultimately be considered an act of love.

Concerning tradition, there can be no question that the ethical instruction of the Christian church throughout its history has been consistently opposed to homosexual intercourse.

Concerning reason, as Hays observes, statistical and scientific data describe what is, but cannot alone make moral judgments about what ought to be.⁶³ Thus for example, were studies to show that sexual preference is not a matter of choice, as Paul probably thought, but a matter of orientation, Paul could theoretically reply to the effect that this simply supports his understanding that all of humanity is under the 'power of sin'. (To Paul, 'sin' is so fundamental to the human condition that it leads one to involuntary acts of disobedience for which one still remains culpable.⁶⁴) Hays elaborates as follows: 'The gulf is wide between Paul's viewpoint and the modern habit of assigning culpability only for actions assumed to be under free control of the agent. . . . Scientific investigations cannot provide a refutation of Paul's statements; nevertheless it is clear that "reason", in contrast to Scripture and tradition, does provide arguments that may be counterposed to the authority of Paul's judgment.'⁶⁵

Finally, concerning experience, certainly this is the most subjective (and debated) category from which to draw authoritative conclusions.⁶⁶ Whose experience counts above that of another and how may this experience be assessed? When individuals claim to be in a supportive homosexual relationship

in which the grace of God is experienced, how is this to be measured in the light of Scripture? Was Paul wrong? Has the creator suddenly ordained a new order by which such experiences are now right and valid? Could not the opinion of a person who claims to be in a fulfilling homosexual union not simply be a manifestation of humanity's self-deception and confusion as Paul describes it in Romans 1? How could one determine whether or not this is so without reference to a norm such as Scripture? Even if one's 'story' could be assessed in such a way that it functioned authoritatively for the church, would this story stand alongside or eclipse the old scriptural norm? And if Scripture can be eclipsed, on what basis will the church evaluate other people's experiences in the future?⁶⁷

The weight of the fourfold bases for authority in relation to the issue of homosexual relations has been summarized cogently by Hays:

Arguments in favor of acceptance of homosexual relations find their strongest warrants in empirical investigations and in contemporary experience. Those who defend the morality of homosexual relationships within the church may do so only by conferring upon these warrants an authority greater than the direct authority of Scripture and tradition, at least with respect to this question.⁶⁸

Conclusion

So what might a biblical strategy for ministering to homosexual persons look like? This takes us to yet another question which is worthy of a full discussion on its own. Suffice it to note briefly that a biblically sensitive strategy would clearly take us along the lines of offering love, acceptance, and understanding, and it would include a theology of the shared humanity and fallenness of us all. It would condemn any self-righteous attitude that would suggest that a person should be subject to discrimination or isolation from the church purely on the basis of homosexual orientation. It would include a message in love that, contrary to society's thinking, sexual expression is not essential to human fulfillment, as the example of Jesus Christ and countless faithful single Christians (many of them homosexuals) has shown. It would offer openly and without prejudice or judgment the message of the divine forgiveness of sins for *all*. It would seek to reclaim for the church a more credible, workable and dignified social context for living a meaningful and fulfilling single life. It would call upon sexually involved homosexuals who wish to join the fellowship of the church to join with other Christians in turning away from sin in their pilgrimage in faith. It would seek to hold in balance unprejudiced compassion, on the one hand, with the recognition of the stark reality of sin on the other hand – something our Lord did when he said to the woman caught in adultery, 'Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more' (Jn. 8:11). The calling for the church is to live up to the high calling of its Lord by holding these two perspectives in balance, for where there is no fallenness, there is no need of compassion, and where there is no compassion there is no escape from fallenness.

⁶⁷P.D.M. Turner, 'Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation and practice: some notes on philology and interpretation', unpublished MS, p. 8 n. 1. An apparent point of intersection between homosexuality as an inclination or condition and a biblical descriptive terminology appears in the word 'homosexual' in the RSV at 1 Corinthians 6:9, but this translation is misleading. (The New RSV is preferable: 'male prostitutes, sodomites'.)

⁶⁸As Turner notes (*ibid.*), only in Rom. 1 does one find a description of a state of mind associated with homosexual practice, but the practice itself is still mentioned along with this state of mind. Moreover, the state of mind is referred to only in general terms and in conjunction with various other 'disordered desires' that lie at the root of outward vices.

Turner notes two additional reasons for avoiding the terms 'homosexual/homosexuality' in contemporary discussions. First, 'it is unclear whether it connotes (a) the state of mind or emotion, (b) the conduct, whether or not expressing (a), or (c) the condition accompanied by expression'. Turner adds: 'Moreover, the ambiguity now extends to "orientation": is protection being sought for the right to act it out in all situations?' And second, in his opinion, 'in God's providence Scripture reflects a reality of which we are now more aware, namely that the condition [of homosexuality] is not always chosen and that some people have no area of freedom (except in action) for which they can be held responsible' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

⁶⁹Note for example the following excerpt from the Statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, December 1991: 'The story of the Church's attitude to homosexuals has too often been

one of prejudice, ignorance and oppression. All of us need to acknowledge that, and to repent for any part we may have had in it' (*Issues in Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops*, London: Church House Publishing, 1991, p. 48). In illustration of the point made in the previous footnote, notice, however, the confusing ambiguity that arises from the use of the term 'homosexual'.

⁷⁰This give-away line appears to provide the *raison d'être* for the so-called second creation account.

⁷¹Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Bible Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

⁷²Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), p. 81. Even if there were substance to the claims of Horner, the alleged biblical allusion to homosexual traits and/or same-sex sex would have to be prescribed or set forth in a positive exemplary light for it to be significant for Christian ethical reflection today.

⁷³Although there is no reference in the gospels to Jesus having spoken specifically about homosexual relations, Turner ('Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation', p. 4) makes an interesting case on the basis of the meaning of *porneia* in the Greek Bible, that homosexual relations would likely have been included in the use of this word by Jesus according to Mt. 5:32 and 19:9. Turner defines biblical *porneia* as coming to mean 'all irregular genital contact except adultery and in some contexts [it] seems to be a portmanteau for adultery too. Mt. v and xix are cases in point'. He adds, 'It is thus not tenable that the Gospel record shows Jesus making no reference to homosexual acts' (*ibid.*). In any case, the gospels portray Jesus affirming the traditional view of heterosexual marriage as the divinely ordained order for humanity (see for example Mt. 19:4-6; Mk. 10:6-9).

⁷⁴Even in scholarly literature, one is sometimes led to infer that it would be of no great significance if homosexual behaviour was condoned by the modern church since homosexual relationships are mentioned relatively infrequently in biblical literature. Although the proponents of this logic would hardly be likely to do so, the same logic could be applied to cases such as bestiality or child sacrifice.

⁷⁵D. S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955). Bailey argues that the men of Sodom were not wanting intercourse with Lot's guests, but simply credentials by which to judge that the strangers posed no threat to the town.

⁷⁶Cf. also Jdg. 19:25.

⁷⁷The following comment of Turner ('Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation', p. 1), made with reference even to those who acknowledge the sexual connotation of the Hebrew word 'know', is poignant: 'Some . . . want to make the main moral point the threat of a breach of hospitality. This makes a weak argument. Why should homosexual gang-rape have violated hospitality, unless it were inhospitable?'

⁷⁸Gordon Wenham, 'The Old Testament attitude to homosexuality', *Expository Times* 102 (1990-91), 361. Wenham states, 'It may also be noted that the motive for divine judgment is similar in both cases. The flood was sent because of the great wickedness of man demonstrated by the illicit union of women with supernatural beings, the "sons of God". In the case of Sodom another type of illicit sexual intercourse is at least contributory in showing it deserves its destruction' (emphasis mine).

⁷⁹The unnatural relations primarily in mind in Jude 7 might possibly be between the men of Sodom and angels (which Lot's visitors were, in addition to being men). It is interesting to note that the implications of this passage from Jude are sometimes downplayed by implying that this epistle is somehow less deserving of a place in the Christian canon than certain other epistles. For obvious reasons, this kind of argument should be allowed to carry very little weight.

⁸⁰Wenham, 'Old Testament attitude', 362.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 363.

⁸⁶Works which uphold this view include the following: John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976); Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*; and Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁸⁷See, for example, John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 100-102. It is unfortunate that so highly influential a book as this contains so many misleading lines of evidence. It is no exaggeration to say that many of the arguments rallied in support of Boswell's thesis are based upon misinterpretations of classical and other sources.

⁸⁸Even if Israel's negative attitude toward this practice were attributable in part to a xenophobia *vis-à-vis* the Canaanites, this alone cannot have been determinative, since Israel had no qualms about sharing many practices with the Canaanites, such as many forms of sacrifice (Wenham, 'Old Testament attitude', 362). Wenham states: 'Aversion to Canaanite custom no more explains Israel's attitude towards homosexuality than it does its preference for monotheism' (*ibid.*).

⁸⁹See for example Karl van der Toorn, 'Prostitution (Cultic)', *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5 (1992), pp. 510-513; Elaine Adler Goodfriend, 'Prostitution (OT)', *ibid.*, pp. 507-509. A possible reference to male cultic prostitution

occurs in Dt. 23:17–18. Goodfriend (*ibid.*, p. 508) is nonetheless dubious, while van der Toorn (*ibid.*, p. 512) suggests that the prostitution was possibly cultic only in the sense that the money gained from prostitution was paid to the temple, in payment for a vow.

²¹See Richard B. Hays, 'Relations natural and unnatural: a response to John Boswell's exegesis of Romans 1', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986), 212 n. 7.

²²Lev. 20:18. The law concerning menstruation is often cited as an example against the applicability of the law concerning homosexual intercourse. Given the fact that many of the principles lying behind OT law concerning sex are expressed in the early chapters in Genesis, it may be that the law about menstruation reflects a more general concern for pollution of the land as the result of the shedding of human blood, a phenomenon which in other contexts usually occurred as a result of violence, as in Gn. 4:10–11. This might help to explain why, as Sperling notes, menstruation is only one of two categories in which blood in itself is a source of contamination, the other category being unjustified homicide (S. David Sperling, 'Blood', *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1 (1992), p. 762).

²³In illustration of the difficulty with applying this distinction meaningfully, as noted above, Lev. 18:22 and Lev. 20:13 cannot be limited to a law concerning ritual purity alone. For additional problems in so limiting these laws, see the *Statement by the House of Bishops*, p. 15.

²⁴See the discussion later in this paper of Rom. 1:26–27 and of the OT background to the meaning of *arsenokoitēs* in 1 Cor. 6:9.

²⁵David F. Wright, 'Homosexual or prostitutes? The meaning of *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10)', *Vigilia Christianae* 38 (1984), 125–153.

²⁶Idolatry is mentioned in the same context as homosexual relations in Leviticus, but it does not follow from this that the relations condemned involved cultic prostitution in pagan cults. Rather, the OT quite commonly discusses moral-social vices in the same context as religious ones (see for example Ezk. 8–9).

²⁷Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 110.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Hays, 'Relations natural and unnatural', pp. 190–191 (emphasis his).

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 190.

³¹Hays observes (*ibid.*, p. 211), 'We must forthrightly recognize that in Romans 1 Paul portrays homosexual activity as a vivid and shameful sign of humanity's confusion and rebellion against God; then we must form our moral choices in light of that proposal.'

³²Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 107–117.

³³As Hays notes ('Relations natural and unnatural', pp. 186, 187), Boswell must here assume the phenomenon of sexual 'orientation' which was not recognized until modern times (see further my introductory comments).

³⁴Cited in Hays, 'Relations natural and unnatural', p. 187.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁶Furnish, *Moral Teaching of Paul*, pp. 72–77.

³⁷William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); for the works of Scroggs and Furnish, see the references given above.

³⁸These words occur in a 'stock list' of vices which scholars suggest Paul possibly borrowed from Hellenistic Judaism. See further David Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), for elaboration and other examples of vice (and virtue) lists.

³⁹Turner, 'Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation', p. 4. Turner observes further that 'in such a context straight after the word *moikoi* no-one would have read it differently . . . "Catamites" is the right rendering'. Compare W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1952/University of Chicago, 1979), p. 489, s.v. *malakos* '2. of pers. soft, effeminate, esp. of catamites, men and boys who allow themselves to be misused homosexually'. Scroggs (*New Testament and Homosexuality*, p. 106) concludes similarly that *malakos* likely refers here to 'the "call-boy", the youth who consciously imitated feminine styles and ways and who walked the thin line between passive homosexual activity for pleasure and that for pay'. Contrast Boswell (*Christianity*, pp. 339–341) who tries to argue that *malakos* 'refers to general moral weakness, with no specific connection to homosexuality' (*ibid.*, p. 341).

⁴⁰Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, p. 106.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 107; compare Turner, 'Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation', pp. 5–6.

⁴³Boswell, *Christianity*, p. 342.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 345, 344.

⁴⁵Wright, 'Homosexuals or prostitutes', pp. 125–153.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 126–146; cf. Turner, 'Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation', p. 6.

⁴⁷*Ibid.* Here, as in certain other cases, I transliterate the Greek where the original quotation contains the actual Greek letters.

⁴⁸*I.e.* both the passive and the active role in male homosexual intercourse.

⁴⁹*I.e. pornoi.*

⁵⁰Turner, 'Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation', p. 6 (cf. p. 4).

⁵¹Scroggs, *Homosexuality and the New Testament*, p. 120.

⁵²Note, for example, Gordon Fee (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), who states, 'Most likely the list is a conscious reflection of the Mosaic Law as law and expresses the kinds of sins the law was given to prohibit.'

⁵³Or, possibly, 'male prostitute'. In support of this alternative, see Turner, 'Biblical texts relevant to homosexual orientation', p. 4; for references to *pornos* meaning 'male prostitute' outside the NT, see for example Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon* p. 700, s.v. *pornos*.

⁵⁴Fee (*1 and 2 Timothy*, p. 49) draws attention to the fact that there is a very early rabbinic tradition that links slave dealing to the eighth commandment.

⁵⁵For Scroggs's interpretation to be correct, *arsenokoitēs* would have to refer to the passive partner here, whereas he argued that in 1 Cor. 6:9 this same word denotes the active partner (*i.e.* the homosexual prostitute). In other words, on his understanding, Scroggs has two words for the active homosexual prostitute and none for the passive partner. The apparent incongruity between *arsenokoitai* as active in 1 Cor. and passive in 1 Tim. may be seen in Scroggs's statement that '*Pornos* could effectively function in relation to *arsenokoitēs* in precisely the same way as *malakos* does in 1 Corinthians' (Scroggs, *Homosexuality and the New Testament*, p. 120). Later Scroggs seems to allude to the incongruity again in his comment that 'perhaps the effeminate call-boy is also included in the condemnation, but I see no way of making a judgment on the matter' (*ibid.*, p. 121).

⁵⁶It is interesting to note that *pornos* and *arsenokoitēs* are the only terms listed both in 1 Cor. 6:9–10 and 1 Tim. 1:9–10.

⁵⁷For a discussion of the roles of these various authorities within the context of Anglicanism, and the question whether and to what extent experience is applicable in an Anglican context, see Murray L. Newman and Richard Reid, 'The Bible and sexual ethics', in *A Wholesome Example: Sexual Morality and the Episcopal Church*, ed. Robert W. Prichard (Alexandria, VA: Charter Printing, 1991), p. 1.

⁵⁸Some argue similarly for the acceptance of a sexually active homosexual on the analogy that the non-procreative and outcast eunuchs of Mt. 19:12 and Acts 8:26–40 were so accepted, but the analogy labours at the point of the eunuchs being celibate and sexually inactive.

⁵⁹Hays, 'Relations natural and unnatural', p. 208.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁶¹*Ibid.*; cf. Rom. 7:13–25.

⁶²*Ibid.* (emphasis his).

⁶³Newman and Reid observe that experience, 'if it is to be included', is clearly the 'most elusive and problematic' category ('Bible and sexual ethics', p. 1). They cite Richard Hooker in support of the claim that of the various categories, 'The Bible is first and primary' for Anglicans. This stands in contrast to the growing popularity in some ecclesiastical circles of hearing people's stories and of reflecting upon them as if these stories determine the church's stance – even above Scripture, tradition and reason. This represents a remarkable change from the church's position historically, a change that is perhaps symptomatic of a crisis of authority in society as well as in the church, particularly in relation to a timeless standard such as the Bible.

⁶⁴Hays, 'Relations natural and unnatural', p. 211.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*