

On the Bible and Sexuality

William Loader

This morning I received an inquiry about these issues from someone deeply conflicted. I post my response in the hope that others might find it useful.

Dear ---,

Thank you for your email.

I understand what it means to come from an evangelical/fundamentalist background, because those were also my beginnings, which I still value in many ways. I grasped then that I could trust God and need never be afraid to ask questions and explore.

I have never given up my evangelical conviction that the most important thing in life is to have a restored relationship with God. It was in fact my faith that led me to study, ministry, and research, and in doing so to take the Bible seriously, more seriously than I had when I was a fundamentalist when I saw it as a timeless infallible book.

Taking the Bible seriously for me meant reading it carefully, learning Greek and Hebrew so that I could pick up its fine points, and deepening my understanding of its religious and cultural context.

So I embarked on a journey that many have taken and which began internationally in the 18th century beginning with the realisation that the Bible is not a single authored book. It is two collections, one in Hebrew, one in Greek, and more than that, the New Testament was a collection of individual authors each with their own style.

With the gospels in particular it was very clear that there were four versions of the same basic story, but also that the first three were often identical to the point that they must have been interdependent, leading to the widespread conclusion that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke independently supplemented Mark. I remember exploring their three versions of the one story and noticing both how well they fitted together but also where there were clear difference in style and content. Most dramatically this was apparent in the differences between the first three and John. John has Jesus' ministry last three years and has him die when the lambs were slain the afternoon before Passover Day, whereas the first three have Jesus' ministry last just one year and have him die on Passover Day.

Taking the Bible seriously meant for me realising that these were people bearing witness to their faith in their way with their information Through their witness to God's Word and action they had become vehicles through which God spoke and speaks to us. Their words are their words not the words of God nor words somehow supernaturally dictated or controlled by God.

The differences I mention above (and there are, of course, plenty more) would make that an impossible idea. The statement of faith of the church to which I

belong, the Uniting Church in Australia (formed when Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregational churches united in 1977) declares that the scriptures are witnesses to the Word and the Word is Jesus.

Cross cultural encounter with respect has to be central to our approach to these writings, as I see it. I must always be on my guard not to hear only what I want to hear or read into their words what I want to find. It is also the rule for any personal encounter with others.

I, therefore, respect that they will have believed that the universe came into being just 6000 years ago, that the earth was flat (or if they knew some Greek philosophy, that the world was round and the sun circled it), that human reproduction happened when the male placed the seed/the fertilised egg in the female womb, that, generally, men were superior to women, that arid soil and prickly plants came about because of Adam's sin, and much more.

Of course, they were people of their time. We would have believed the same. It is not for us to feel superior because we know that none of those beliefs turned out to be correct. We may have more knowledge but that does not mean we are wiser. Their witness was human AND God speaks through their witness, despite their speaking a different language and reflecting different assumptions on many things than ours.

Where do same gender sexual relations fit into this? Some people in their world did believe that some people were born gay and some, the vast majority, were born straight.

All our evidence indicates that Jews, and that includes those who formed the Christian movement, rejected such beliefs.



They took Gen 1:27 (God made male and female) seriously as their science and so concluded that all people were by nature heterosexual and that people having an orientation, and feelings, let alone acting on them towards members of their own gender, were acting contrary to their nature and to how God made them. They took the prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 20 and applied them more widely to condemn all such same-sex behaviour.

Given what their science told them, that all makes sense. Paul can therefore use such same gender orientation and behaviour in Romans 1 as his illustration of the wider world's depravity because he knew the believers in Rome would agree with him. It was uncontroversial. His list in 1 Cor 6:9–10 very probably refers to active and passive gays, as does 1 Tim 1:10 to the active partner. This is how Jews of the time understood it and it must have also seemed very reasonable especially when you looked at male and female bodies. It was obvious how they should fit together.

It has taken a long time for us to realise that the matter is not so simple. Some people are not born male or female but have mixed genitalia. Inside, some people also have mixed sexual orientation and some are primarily attracted to people of their own gender. They are a small but not insignificant minority.

I remember once when I was running a workshop in a farming area and farmers saying: of course! This is also the case among our cattle. In fact, we now realise that this is something which occurs in the animal world. We, too, are mammals.

Does it show disrespect to Paul or to the Bible to suggest he and its authors did not know everything there is to know about sex? Of course, not. True hallowing of scripture means taking it seriously in its own terms and its own world and engaging with it. The world is not flat. People are not all heterosexual.

This means that it would be irresponsible to take what Paul says based on his assumptions and apply it in contexts where we know that his assumptions need updating. Yes, there will be some who are just as Paul put it, heterosexuals who have messed up their sexuality, but there are others for whom this is not so.

Now that it has become safe for people and the media to talk openly about same gender relations, we have come to recognise many wonderful people, leaders in the community, in churches, in government, in the arts, and generally, who are highly regarded human beings. The existence of such real people, even better, meeting them, can be so much more persuasive than arguments.

There are two key aspects which, I have observed, play a role in the struggle many people have. First: how to understand the Bible. The first believers had to face this question when they ventured with their mission out into the non-Jewish world. Scripture was clear: non-Jews joining the people of God must be circumcised (Genesis 17) and there were other parts of the biblical law which also applied to them and Jews should keep the whole Law.

They compromised, setting circumcision aside and many other requirements. There was outrage from the fundamentalists. They sought to undo Paul's mission in Galatia provoking his terse response. Paul had found himself earlier in conflict with fellow Jewish believers persuaded by people from James in Jerusalem to keep strictly to the biblical law as they saw it and not eat regularly with non Jews. He reports it in Gal 2:11-14. His partner Barnabas abandoned him along with Peter.

Paul's argument was that God's grace overrode such laws. In other words, generally, they read and applied scripture not on the basis of its letter but its spirit, its heart, and, where need be, set aside such requirements. Mark interprets Jesus as doing so in Mark 7 in declaring all foods clean, for instance.

The second aspect is: what do we now know to be the truth about sexuality? Is everyone heterosexual as Paul and his fellow Jews believed or not? In other words, do we, like Paul and co on circumcision and such laws, face a situation not envisaged by the Bible's writers, including Paul, himself? Most, with good reason, would say: yes, we do. Then we embrace people and their sexualities with love and acceptance and with the encouragement that in all things love rules, as for straight people, so for all.

[I attached a paper I wrote on approaching the New Testament. "Approaching the New Testament as Source of Faith and Witness to Faith", now published in my collected essays just published: Jesus Left Loose Ends (Adelaide: ATF Press).

I hope this proves useful.

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