

Understanding Paul on Same-Sex Relations

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There are two references in Paul's undisputed letters that relate to same-sex relations. One is in 1 Corinthians where in a list of people who will not enter God's kingdom he mentions *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* (6:9). The latter word derives from the word for male and the word for bed and so could be translated literally male bedders, men who take men to bed. My assessment of the evidence is that this probably refers to the active male partner in same sex relations. I say probably because we can never know for certain and I discuss the possibilities in my book, *The New Testament on Sexuality*. The first word means "soft". It can mean effeminate and so probably means the passive partner in such relations – again, probably.



The other main reference to same-sex relations comes in Paul's letter to the Romans where Paul is planning to visit churches in Rome. He writes with great sensitivity because others founded them and he would be a guest and, more than that, he had a doubtful reputation because some accused him of betraying his Jewish faith and propounding a message which undermined sound ethical behaviour.

Paul therefore begins in chapter 1 by seeking common ground.

They would certainly agree with him when he cited same-sex relations as sin, so this is how he begins. He does so in a way typical of Paul. Thus, he focuses not just on sins but on sin as a state of mind. Others before him, like the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, had treated sins, especially sexual sins, as symptoms of a corrupt mind evident in worshipping idols (14:12–31).

Paul similarly links having a perverted understanding of God with having a perverted understanding one's sexuality. His example is men having sexual passion towards men instead of women (Rom 1:18–28). This went, as Paul implied, not just against the obvious anatomical evidence about how things fit together, but also against how God made people, namely male and female (Gen 1:27).

In other words, while some in the wider Greco-Roman world contemplated that some people were naturally gay (I use that term very broadly) – and Paul would have known that –, Paul would have rejected such thoughts. His contemporary, Philo, a Jewish philosopher and exegete in Alexandria, makes this quite explicit and we may assume that in doing so he reflected a widely held Jewish assumption of the time, namely that all people are heterosexual, male or female.

Paul will have assumed that those listening to his letter being read in congregations in Rome, who had strong Jewish roots, would agree with him. After all, he was not at this point in his letter promoting some new teaching but appealing to common ground. They would have all agreed.

There is a logic to Paul's position. If all people are heterosexual as created by God, then any mindset, attitude and action which ran contrary to that was unnatural, that is, contrary to how he and they believed God created human beings.

Paul is not satisfied to condemn acts. He also sees orientation as the problem. He points to people's state of mind as underlying their actions. Such people have a "darkened" and "unfit" mind (Rom

1:21, 28). Such minds produce misdirected passions, and such passions produce sinful acts. Homosexual acts between men had been condemned in Leviticus (18:22; 20:13) and were later in Jewish literature applied broadly to refer also to women. Paul is being consistent, however, with his analysis of sin and sins elsewhere, in going beyond condemning such acts to identifying the states of mind behind them.

In recent times there has been widespread recognition that, contrary to Paul's understandable assumptions, there are people who are gay, that is, not everyone is heterosexual. It is also the case in the animal world as farmers remind me. One may want to blame Paul, but if we are to take scripture seriously we need to recognise that its writers reflected assumptions of their time. It shows no disrespect to them or to scripture to acknowledge that.

On the contrary, there is much which they assumed which we no longer assume, such as the age of creation, the nature of planet earth, not as flat nor as having the sun circle it. This is also the case in how we understand procreation. The man does not plant the seed (like an egg) in the women. Our understanding of what it means to be man and woman also no longer see one as superior to the other. We can also no longer believe as they did that the climax of history was about to happen and Paul did in believing that he would still be alive when it happened.

Our knowledge indicates that some people are gay, something Paul and his Roman listeners would have assumed could not be naturally so. This means that we cannot simply take over what Paul wrote about the nature of human sexuality and ignore what we now know to be true. Some go half way, acknowledging that some people are gay, but then insist – I think rather cruelly – that they should not express their sexuality.

One of the problems lies in what people understand when they speak of taking scripture seriously. For me it means listening to what its authors were saying in their language and culture and respecting that when I do so, I will at some points feel distance because I can no longer ignore that on some matters humankind has made scientific advances. That doesn't prevent my finding not just distance but also proximity, as their reflections about God continue to speak to me and challenge me. That is also why I read them, preach on them, and listen to their exposition.

A fundamentalist or quasi-fundamentalist stance does not to my mind take scripture seriously, but treats it as a timeless authority, though in most case rather selectively. I see some people taking such a stance when they try to argue that Paul never meant what he said in the way I outline it above, but was targeting only abusive same-sex relations, such as pederasty or the like (whereas Rom 1:27 assumes consensual passion). I see others doing the same when they argue that, most uncharacteristically, Paul here is condemning only the acts. That is so unlike Paul. Trying to stay in harmony with Paul, they distort what he says to make it fit their views. I see people doing this who affirm gay rights and who deny them. Neither approach takes scripture seriously.

When we step back from the modern forms of fundamentalism and quasi-fundamentalism, whether from the left or the right, we can return to the heart of the biblical witness and affirm God's love for all human beings, male, female, or gay or whatever other descriptor one may wish to use. The call to all is oneness with God and partnership with God in living healthy and loving lives.