

Paul's teaching on homosexual behaviour

In his First Letter to the Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul lists people whose behaviour 'will not inherit the kingdom of God'. The gospel is about human lives being transformed through the power of God's Spirit. Paul names some of the more obvious vices that resist grace, corrupt the person and the community, and which, without repentance, will mean the loss of salvation. Included in the list are μαλακοὶ and ἀρσενικοῖται. Paul lists them without context or explanation. To whom is he referring? Let us look first at aspects of sexual behaviour that Paul would have encountered in the eighteen months he spent in Corinth, and then at typical Jewish reactions to the sexual behaviour for which Corinth had acquired quite a reputation.

1. Male sexual behaviour in the Greek and Roman world

The culture in the Greek and Roman world was, speaking generally, indulgent towards male sexual behaviour. The male was considered (by male writers and teachers) to be superior, not only intellectually, but also from the point of view of physical beauty. Sexual union with a woman is needed for obvious reasons, but the idea that the appropriate partner for a male was another male was widespread.

An adult male was encouraged to have a young male to give him pleasure, including the pleasure of sexual gratification. It was expected that the intimacy be intellectually stimulating, and that the older male would look to the education of the younger male, and behave towards him in a sensitive way. The younger males in this relationship were sometimes described as μαλακοὶ – one of the words used by Paul in our text. Literally it means 'soft', hence 'effeminate'.

Moralists condemned those who ran brothels, and those males who made a living out of offering their sexual services to older males. In cities like Corinth, the presence of coiffured and perfumed young men in the streets and public squares was a common sight and moralists of divergent philosophical persuasions spoke out against what they decried as decadent behaviour, but pederasty was widely encouraged. The following judgment is typical: 'To be in love with those who are beautiful and chaste is the experience of a kind-hearted and generous soul; but to hire for money and to indulge in licentiousness is the act of a man who is wanton and ill-bred' (Aeschines, Timarchus, 137).

One can readily see the dangers inherent in what was judged to be acceptable forms of pederasty: dangers in the unequal nature of the relationship, in its impermanency, and in the occasion it provides for abuse and humiliation. However, the point being made here is that the culture saw its advantages as outweighing its disadvantages. There is a good deal of evidence in the ancient texts of a prevailing misogyny, but there is no evidence of the kind of homophobia that we witness today.

2. The Hebrew Scriptures on male sexual behaviour

There is the terrible story of Sodom (Genesis 19) which describes a mob seeking to rape two male strangers to whom Lot has given hospitality. Rather than betray hospitality Lot offers to hand over to them his two virgin daughters. The story is a condemnation of rape, both

homosexual and heterosexual, and betrayal of the law of hospitality. The story demonstrates an assumption of male superiority and a disgusting denigration of women, but it is not about homosexuality versus heterosexuality.

The same issues are highlighted in the even worse story of the Levite (Judges 19). A mob wanted to have sex with the Levite. Instead they were offered his concubine whom they raped till she died.

The only passages that refer to homosexual behaviour are found in the Book of Leviticus: 'You shall not lie with a male (ἄρσενος κοίτην) as with a woman; it is an abomination' (Leviticus 18:22). 'If a man lies with a male (ἄρσενος κοίτην) as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them' (Leviticus 20:13).

The word 'abomination' occurs 116 times in the Hebrew Bible and covers a range of behaviours (see for example Proverbs 6:16-19). Since no context is given for the condemnation expressed in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, we must ask what behaviour are the authors calling an 'abomination'? We do not know what they were saying unless we know what the nature of the behaviour was which they were setting out to condemn.

Were they condemning the kind of public, flagrant, male prostitution that they observed in the Greek world? Were they concerned at the waste of male semen and so of what they understood to be the vehicle of life (they had no concept of the role of the female gamete)?

What emerges in the discussions of these texts among the Rabbis and in the writings of Jews living in the Greek world is a strong disgust for the male prostitution that is also condemned by Greek and Roman moralists. They also condemned pederasty, which Jewish writers condemn as typically Gentile.

There is no discussion at all of homosexuality as a physiological-psychological sexual preference or tendency. The focus is on homosexual behaviour. It is not evident that the condemnations in Leviticus envisage a situation in which two male adults as equals express their affection sexually and with mutual sensitivity.

3. The Christian Scriptures and homosexual behaviour

When we turn to the Christian Scriptures we find that Jesus has a lot to say about love, about patience, about respect and forgiveness – values that are basic to any committed love. There is no record of Jesus ever addressing the subject of homosexuality. Paul touches on the topic in three places. In two of these he includes homosexual behaviour in lists, but without comment. Again we need to ask what behaviour he was condemning.

1 Corinthians 6:9

Among those who will not inherit the kingdom Paul lists 'μαλακοί' and 'άρσενοκοῖται'. According to the most obvious reading of the text Paul is repeating what is commonly said by Jewish writers and to a lesser extent also by Stoic and other Greek and Roman moralists of

his day. He is speaking against the behaviour of those young men, quite obvious in cities like Corinth, who dressed themselves up and offered themselves for money for the sexual gratification of other males. He is also condemning those who take advantage of them. The word ἀρσενοκοῖται is not found in the Greek moralists. It seems to have its origin in Jewish circles and to derive from the Leviticus texts. Since Paul simply lists these sins here we should assume that he is repeating common Jewish condemnation of male prostitution and pederasty. We would need more evidence to justify extending Paul's meaning to condemn outright all expressions of homosexual attraction.

1Timothy 1:10

The same must be said about his statement to Timothy. Among those who behave in ways that are 'against sound teaching' he includes 'fornicators (πόρνος), sodomites (ἀρσενοκοίτης) and slave traders' (ἀνδραποδιστής). The first group are the πόρνοι, the primary meaning of which is 'male prostitutes'. This may well be its meaning here. If so it may include those whom Paul calls μαλακοὶ in 1 Corinthians. The second group are, once again, the ἀρσενοκοῖται, which, as in his list in 1 Corinthians, could be referring to those who take advantage of the prostitutes. The third group are the ἀνδραποδισταῖς. Paul may well be referring to those who take slave boys into brothels for purposes of prostitution.

Romans 1:25-27

In the only other text in which Paul refers to homosexual behaviour he goes beyond a simple listing of sins: 'Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator ... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.'

This text is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it is one of only a handful of texts from the time that even mention female homosexual behaviour. Secondly, Paul uses the expression 'unnatural' (παρὰ φύσιν), used by a number of Greek moralists in their condemnation of male homosexual gratification that was separated from real affection and where the younger man was treated as a commodity for sale.

Given that Paul was writing to Christians who were living in a Greco-Roman milieu it is reasonable to conclude that he is condemning the exploitative, corrupting or injurious homosexual relations that he witnessed, as in other places he condemns such behaviour among heterosexuals. He includes women to demonstrate the universal degradation from which human beings need redemption. It is likely that he intends to include the Gentile practice of pederasty. Beyond that, we are in the area of conjecture.

To propose that he was speaking against adult consensual intimacy between male or female homosexuals in a committed relationship is to extrapolate well beyond the context of the times. Paul may never have envisaged the possibility of such sensitive intimacy. If Paul did

think of all homosexual relations as 'unnatural', this could have been because he assumed that all people are 'by nature' heterosexual?

We should note that everything Paul says about love, sensitivity, mutuality, and the sacred nature of sex, is relevant to the discussion of sexual behaviour. What we cannot do is take these few texts from Paul and use them to close the discussion on homosexual behaviour, as some are wont to do. The Bible has a lot to offer us, but we must discover the most loving way forward, faced with questions which are, in the light of advances in psychology, quite new.

If we are want to act in a Christian way we need to keep our eyes on Jesus, who revealed in everything he was and said and did that God is love. In every scene in the Gospels we see him loving people. He rejoiced in their goodness and when people were behaving badly he knew to embrace them in love, knowing that only love can offer us the space to change when change is needed; only love can attract us to find our deepest self and grow in the unique expression of love that each person must find.

Though homosexuality is not mentioned in the Gospels, it is surely obvious that our sexual identity is at the heart of who we are. Jesus pleaded that we love others as we love ourselves. If we are heterosexual surely we should rejoice in the amazing gift to us and to society of people who are homosexual.

If we are homosexual we should rejoice at the amazing gift to us and to society of people who are heterosexual. Our hearts should be filled with gratitude as we rejoice in our differences. As regards our sexual identity it will take us all our life to learn to express our identity in ways that are only beautiful, and we will need everyone's help on this journey. People who are homosexual need special sensitivity because they are in the minority and they have suffered a long history of ignorance and conscious or unconscious prejudice. If we believe that God is love, and if we watch the way Jesus respected and loved everyone why do we not love each other across our differences? Should not Christians be the first to embrace our own sexual identity, and join people who identify as heterosexual or homosexual in joyfully celebrating their committed love.