

Homosexuality and the Church

Bible Answers to Moral Questions

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TODAY'S society places a great emphasis on sex and sexual behaviour. What used to be private is now open to the harsh glare of publicity. In past generations there was a generally accepted code of morality, and deviations from that code were treated as just that - deviant behaviour. But today a vast range of sexual behaviour is both tolerated and promoted. Each individual is encouraged from the youngest age to do what suits him or her best. This climate of toleration and license is particularly noticeable where homosexuality is concerned. It is an increasingly prominent way of life, and there are powerful pressure groups ensuring that the homosexual viewpoint is always presented on an equal basis with heterosexuality. The prevalent term is 'Gay activism', where 'gay' is used to describe every form of homosexuality.

These pressures continue and grow, despite the Bible's clear and absolute rejection of homosexuality. The alternative lifestyle is so strongly promoted these days that even the established churches are much less forthright in condemning homosexuality. They can only act like this by denying the Divine authority of the Bible, and by believing that a 'loving' relationship - of whatever form - is more important than upholding God's law. In this modern world, we need to know why the Bible says that homosexual behaviour is so wrong, and why - despite the Bible's message - some churchmen so often defend an individual's right to enter into a homosexual relationship.

As the title of this booklet suggests, there is a religious element to the subject. Religion is about relationships - primarily the relationship between God and man, but it is also about man's own relationships with his fellow-creatures. What we learn through a religious faith, is that God is the Sovereign Power who must be worshipped, and who is entitled to the obedience of His creatures. Bible believers recognise that they are not free to invent their own moral code but have to accept the unchanging commands given by God which can be found in His Word. They must try to live lives that are pleasing to Him. Jesus said, "You are my friends if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:14), and in God's Word

can be found a description of the character He desires to find in men and women: "On this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

God's purpose involves reconciling man to Himself and repairing the relationship that was destroyed by Sin - which is essentially the failure to fulfil God's commands. This reconciliation was achieved by God, and at His initiative. He sent Jesus Christ, who was completely obedient to Him. Jesus overcame where every other man and woman has failed, and his life became a pattern for every true believer to follow. Through their association with him by faith and baptism, Christians are brought near to God. In discussing the subject of homosexuality and the church, therefore, we must seek to discover God's assessment, and be guided by His Word, and ask how Jesus would react if he was living in today's world.

Forgiveness in Christ

But first we shall look at the Christian life and the appeal of the Gospel message.

When the Apostles of Jesus preached in his name after his death and resurrection, they called on men and women to "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). This repentance and baptism was to be followed by a life devoted to "the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer" (verse 42).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, this is described as living "a new life" in Christ, and there are many passages which explain how a life of sin must be forsaken, so that a life of righteousness can be attempted. Here are two of them

"We were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4)

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

The need to change from an old to a new way of life applies to everyone who seeks to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. This need is the subject of many New Testament passages which include lists of different forms of behaviour. The purpose of these lists is two-fold:

- to depict the general sinfulness of society; and
- to encourage believers to avoid what is bad and practise what is good.

Galatians 5 provides one example:

"The works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like ... those who practise such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (verses 19-21)

'Hatred' is one of the vices listed. Paul did not mean that one angry outburst will certainly exclude a person from God's kingdom; he was referring to a way of life dominated by uncontrolled anger: "Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (verse 21, NIV). This is also made clear in the next chapter, when the apostle says: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life" (Galatians 6:7,8).

The message in this passage is that God has established a moral code which He wishes His children to adopt. We must not deceive ourselves, for deliberately to flout God's commands is a mockery of His authority as our Creator. How can we expect to receive the promise of eternal life if we fail to listen to God's Word, or if we deliberately live in a way we know is unacceptable to Him?

What we have learned from this brief review of the message preached by the Apostles is that the Gospel of salvation involves the following process:

- through faithful repentance and baptism, sins are forgiven "for Christ's sake";
- baptized believers are asked to live a new life in Christ, in which they try to forsake selfish desires, and try to live only for him;
- sins committed after baptism will still be forgiven, so long as a person is sincerely trying to follow the example of Jesus.

As the Apostle says, "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

What has all this to do with our subject?

This may seem to have little to do with our subject, but in another list of unacceptable activities in 1 Corinthians 6, homosexuality is included:

"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were

some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Once again, Paul warns against self-deception. "Do not be deceived", he says, there are patterns of living which are unacceptable to God, and which will prevent those who live like that from entering God's Kingdom.

The first century world, where worship of the one God of heaven had been put aside for paganism and a pantheon of many so-called gods, was notorious for its immorality. Every vice and evil act was commonplace, and the description in the passage from Corinthians was very appropriate to the background against which the gospel was preached. Men, women, and children too were all involved. Many of the Roman emperors were promiscuous in the extreme, and most were homosexual.

The apostle explains that acts of "homosexuality", "sodomy" and the other sins he listed can all be washed away by repentance and baptism. But if they are a way of life which is not forsaken, those who live like that "will not inherit the kingdom of God", in just the same way as the person who continues to practise heterosexual fornication or adultery forfeits all hope of entering God's Kingdom.

It is apparent that, in the church at Corinth there were believers whose former lives had been full of all sorts of uncleanness, but that way of life had been put away - "such were some of you", Paul declared. These believers had tried to put into practice the command to "put on the new man" by living according to the example of the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:10).

Men and women are asked to model their lives on Jesus, and to recognise that there are activities, thoughts and pursuits which are offensive to God and demeaning to those who pursue them. As this booklet is designed specially to consider homosexuality, it focuses on this particular practice. But it must be recognised that the other activities mentioned in the list are equally unacceptable to God. The Apostle says that those who adopt any of them as a way of life will not be in God's Kingdom. But before we think about that, there is an important question to ask about homosexuality.

Why is homosexuality abhorrent to God?

First of all, there is no doubt that it is abhorrent to Him. Not only is homosexuality mentioned in the New Testament as we have seen, it is also listed among the laws God gave His people in Old Testament times. In a chapter which lists a whole range of sexual sins; adultery, incest, bestiality, etc., God's law commanded, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination" (Leviticus 18:22). A little later it adds, "Do not

defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you" (verse 24)

It has been suggested that the nations who inhabited Canaan before the children of Israel conquered the Land practised homosexuality and prostitution only in connection with their heathen worship, and that this is what the Law was trying to prevent. While it is true that there were both male and female prostitutes involved in the Canaanite idolatrous worship, homosexuality was also generally rife in many of the Canaanite cities. There is the obvious example of the men of Sodom in Genesis 19, where visitors to their city were vilely threatened - an act described by God's prophet as "an abomination" (Ezekiel 16:50). Sodomy has thus become a widespread term to describe the homosexual act.

Again in Judges 19, there is a similar incident where a visitor to Gibeah in Benjamin was threatened with homosexual abuse by the men of the city, who are described as "perverted men" (Judges 19:22). The age was one where "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

These two incidents, both of them unconnected with the religious worship of those places, show how homosexuality had infiltrated the very fabric of society in those days, just as it has today. It was never totally removed. Not long after the golden age of David and Solomon, history records that "there were also sodomites in the land: and they did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord cast out before the children of Israel" (1 Kings 14:24).

The Law confirmed that homosexuality is an abomination to God. But it also showed that it defiles those who practise it, and the society which tolerates it (Leviticus 18:27) - an aspect to which we shall return in due course. So abominable is it in God's sight that He commanded the nation of Israel that, "If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:13).

The key here is in the phrase "as he lies with a woman", and this is why homosexuality is abhorrent to God. For it was God who ordained the relationships between His creatures. Animals were created for the service of man, and man was "to have dominion over" them (Genesis 1:26,28). But nowhere in the animal kingdom was there found a suitable companion" for man (Genesis 2;18,20). Woman was specially created for this purpose, and this was confirmed by Jesus himself, when he said to the Pharisees in his day, "Have you not read that he who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?" (Matthew 19:4,5, quoting Genesis 2:24).

Marriage - Divinely Ordained

God ordained the relationship between man and woman. He forbade sexual relations between members of the same sex, and He forbade promiscuity, asking that His children form "one flesh" partnerships; one man with one woman. He also recognised that animals could not provide the companionship which human beings need, thus explaining that a spiritual element is involved in this partnership, which can only be found in a loving relationship between man and woman.

Nor should we assume that when the Bible speaks out against homosexuality, it is only commenting on relationships between two males. In Romans 1, Paul also speaks about "women (who) exchanged the natural use for what is against nature" (Romans 1:26). For the purposes of our consideration, therefore, lesbianism is understood to be included in the general term 'Homosexuality'. This passage also explains that homosexual behaviour is "against nature" - in other words, our bodies are not made for it. Being fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14), we should respect the way God has made us. The physical damage which can be caused by doing what is "against nature" means that practising homosexuals - as well as promiscuous heterosexuals - run the risk of contracting serious sexually transmitted venereal diseases. To break God's law of human relationships carries its own potential consequences.

From the Genesis account of the creation of man and woman, and God's comment on their relationship, to commit adultery, incest, bestiality, or homosexuality is to say that God was wrong in the beginning to make the arrangements He did. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they sinned and suffered the consequence of death (Genesis 3:17-19). They deceived themselves, and mocked God's appointments. We should not be surprised that the punishment under Israel's Law for disobeying God's arrangements for human relationships was also death: this was the sentence for adultery (Leviticus 20:10); for incest (verses 11,12); for homosexuality (verse 13); and for bestiality (verse 15).

An Underlying Reason

When the New Testament writers comment on God's arrangement for right personal relationships, the underlying reason is also explained. Like Jesus, the Apostle Paul quoted Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh". His comment about it is extremely important: "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31,32), thus confirming the religious element in the subject.

Throughout the Bible, "the church" refers to the congregation of faithful believers. Paul wrote to "the church of God which is at Corinth" when he explained that homosexuals and others who live to the flesh and not to the spirit, will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

He obviously regarded a homosexual lifestyle - and all other "fleshly" lifestyles - as incompatible with membership of the church. Not that the church is the Kingdom of God, of course, but the Kingdom is described later in the Bible as "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9), meaning the final union of Christ and his church. It would be wholly illogical for anyone to be associated in that consummation of God's purpose who has deliberately forsaken His teachings about the relationships He ordained for mankind.

You will have noticed a singular difference between the Law given to Israel and the Apostle's comments about homosexuality. The Law said, "If a man lie with mankind, as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:13) In the New Testament, under the law of Christ, we are told that anyone living a homosexual life will not inherit the Kingdom. What we may fail to see is that the end result is the same in both cases. Only those who enter God's Kingdom will live forever, and to be barred from the Kingdom is to be consigned to eternal death.

Hard Teaching?

This teaching will seem very hard, especially in an age when the law of the land says there should be no discrimination against individuals on the grounds of race, colour, creed or sexual orientation. It also seems a hard teaching when we are informed that there is a growing proportion of the population who are homosexual or lesbian. Is there no hope for those who find themselves in this condition? This creates a very real problem in the mind of many people, who know the unambiguous comments in the Bible about homosexuality and find them to be harsh and unsympathetic. How would it be (they say) if the Bible stated that only black people, or only white people; only tall people or only short people, could enter the Kingdom of God? We cannot choose how we are born, the colour of our skin or the height of our stature, and it is unreasonable to make a selection based on grounds over which individuals have no control.

It may be for these reasons that so many churchmen now look differently on homosexuality. They say that the scriptures we have considered do not apply to people who live in the twenty-first century, or that they are of no account, so long as there is no homosexual promiscuity. A sound, loving homosexual partnership is, so they say, just as acceptable to God as one between a man and a woman. But how can we put aside God's commands? We cannot say that He is wrong - We therefore need to look for answers to the following serious and important question:

Are Individuals Born Gay?

Despite intensive scientific and medical research into this subject in recent years, there is no sound evidence which proves that some people are born homosexual. Homosexual behaviour is acquired, and not instinctive. The example of the animal kingdom is helpful here, where the same holds true. There are nonetheless examples of animals under

certain conditions showing homosexual tendencies or even trying to mate with another animal of the same sex. When this happens, it has been shown to follow directly from man's interference with nature! upsetting its balance. Because so many domesticated bitches are neutered, for example, dogs will try to mount other dogs. The same happens with cows, but the practice stops as soon as a bull is allowed into the herd.

It is the same in the human creation; homosexual activity occurs most frequently when the sexes are kept apart unnaturally - same-sex boarding schools, the armed forces and prisons are good examples - and it often stops when the restrictions are lifted. It is also reckoned that there are other environmental and cultural reasons for the increase in homosexuality - most notably the widespread breakdown in family life and its impact upon children in broken homes. But none of these point to a person being 'programmed' as a homosexual from birth.

Yet there is a difference between the animal and the human creation. There is no evidence of animals, apart from in the abnormal conditions described above, seeking or preferring same-sex gratification. Only amongst humans is this phenomenon found.

This does not excuse the behaviour, for there is one lesson which the animal creation cannot teach us. God has presented man with a guide to follow and gives him the ability to make moral choices. Animal behaviour is instinctive in them, but it is not the same with man. He is able to decide how he will behave.

Homosexual Tendencies

If there is no conclusive evidence to prove that some people are born gay, what about homosexual tendencies? How should we view them? Is there a difference between those who practise homosexuality and those who do not?

Jesus commented on the principle which lies behind this last question. He was speaking about adultery, and explained that whereas the law could only deal with the act of adultery, adulterous thoughts should be cut off at their source: "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27,28). Jesus was not referring to a casual glance, but to looking with the intent of future action. There is a vast difference between being tempted - which happens to everyone at some time - and allowing temptation to take hold so that "it gives birth to sin" (James 1:15). In a similar vein, the apostle Paul counselled believers in Corinth to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18), for a believer must not allow his mind to dwell on any unlawful sexual temptation - including homosexual temptations. The scriptures say that the act itself is wrong, and so are the lustful thoughts which can lead to the act.

It will probably help us understand Christ's teaching if we go back to those lists of characteristics which the Bible encourages us to forsake. We all have tendencies of one

form or another - some of them can lead to acts which are harmful to ourselves or to others. We could, for example, have a craving for alcohol, and if we did not try to control that tendency, it is highly probable that we should end up being controlled by it. Alcohol is actually a good example, because it can cause serious harm both to the person indulging in it, and to society in general - as testified by the number of alcohol-related crimes and injuries.

The law of Christ encourages us to forsake anything which can have a harmful effect on us or on others. What is more, it gives positive advice about how this can be accomplished. In a passage in Colossians, the Apostle Paul tells his readers to "put off" all those things which have no part in a "new life in Christ", and in their place to "put on" a completely different set of values:

"Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore, put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience." (Colossians 3:2-6)

Ungodly behaviour was punished under Israel's Law by death. Under Christ, the individual has to "put to death" anything which is contrary to God's commands, however personally attractive it may seem. When we accept Christ, we have to try to be re-programmed by the word of God and the example of Jesus. Our past life has been lived under an operating system determined by selfish desire. In Christ, we are asked to live differently: "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).

This is a message for every one of us. Its application is universal and does not apply solely to those who are homosexuals or attracted by homosexuality. Furthermore, God "will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). This "way of escape" is provided by the comfort to be found in God's Word, and by the loving support of fellow believers.

There are two alternative processes described in Colossians 3 - an old way of life that needs to be "put off", and a new way that needs to be "put on". We can see the first of these processes more clearly, especially in its application to homosexuality, by looking at an important passage in Romans:

"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . . For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made . . .

so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God . . . and their foolish hearts were darkened.

"Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man

"Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator

"For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another...

"As they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting . . . who, knowing the righteous judgement of God, that those who practise such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practise them" (Romans 1:18-32).

The Sinking Sands of Sin

There are a number of important points to be found in this passage. The process it describes starts when a man or woman fails to recognise the existence of God, despite all the evidence around us in the things He has made. Forsaking the sovereignty of God is a very serious matter, and something which God Himself cannot overlook. Three times in this short passage, the Apostle explains that, because of man's continued rejection of God, God "gives him up" to the way of life man himself has chosen. The process is a downward spiral leading to rejection, and ultimately to oblivion:

- man fails to acknowledge God
- he elevates himself and his needs above God's
- he is given up to uncleanness of all kinds

The end of the process is when the whole godless situation is applauded by society in general, which not only tolerates immorality, but takes pleasure in it. This has occurred on a number of occasions throughout history - usually when society begins to crumble and decay. The end of the period of the Judges in Israel's history, and the decline and fall of the Roman empire are good examples. But more significantly for the present generation, the last verse in Romans 1 could be a description of our modern world, where immoral behaviour provides the foundation for much popular entertainment.

A Tolerant Society

We said earlier that we should need to return to the subject of the tolerant society. The Apostle was writing against a background where homosexuality was common, just as it was throughout Bible times. The society of his day was still strongly affected by Greek philosophy and the Greek culture where homosexuality was upheld as a 'pure' relationship. "Greek love" is a term still used on occasions to describe homosexuality.

The Law of Moses and its restrictions against homosexuality was God's answer to its prevalence in Old Testament times; and the Apostle's strictures provide God's answer to the same problem when it is faced by Christian believers.

Is Our Age any Different?

It is often suggested that the Bible encourages homophobia (unreasonable fear of homosexuality), and simply reflects the way of thinking of its times. In the enlightened modern world, so the argument runs, we know better than either Moses or Paul.

But do we know better than God? Israel's law was given them by God, and Paul wrote because he was inspired by God. The Bible is preeminently God's word, and not of purely human origin. Its message of hope applies to all people, irrespective of their background, race or culture. The gospel is all about modelling our lives on the Word of God and on Christ, and that requires everyone to undergo a change.

Thankfully, there is another process which can reverse the descent into condemnation described by Paul in Romans 1. It is the process of salvation through Christ which we considered at the beginning of this booklet. Each stage in the downward spiral of sin has its counterpart in the upward call of discipleship. Men and women are encouraged to:

- acknowledge God as the Creator whose ways are always right
- seek always to honour Him, and to live acceptably before Him
- speak to Him in prayer and listen to His Word to guide their actions
- realise their need for forgiveness
- repent and be baptized
- associate with those who believe the same, and who are trying to "put on Christ" each day.

Left to ourselves, the position would be hopeless. But we are not left to ourselves. This is where the Gospel helps to provide the answer. For God sent the Lord Jesus Christ to show men and women the wonder of His purpose. Jesus came preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. He invited people to look forward confidently to a world cleansed from sin and death, and to live in hope of being welcomed into that wonderful age. We have not been asked to do something which is impossible, nor are we left without help. We

can be strengthened through prayer, through reading God's Word, and through the companionship of fellow believers. If we seek to put our lives right with God, He will bind us close to the Lord Jesus Christ, and grant us salvation in his name.

-- MICHAEL ASHTON