

## **Sexuality and the Bible: Reflections of a biblical scholar**

The Revd Canon Professor Loveday Alexander  
*Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield*  
*Canon-Theologian Emeritus, Chester Cathedral*

### **1. Homophobia and the shifting moral landscape**

The Church of England claims that we welcome and affirm the presence of ‘gay and lesbian people’ within the Church, and should repent of ‘hostility to homosexual people’. Statements like these come from both sides in the debate: cf. the *Pilling Report* 2013: 22, 120, 149. This represents a significant shift *on both sides* from the biblical viewpoint, which has no concept of homosexual identity or ‘orientation’. This is a shift based on *reason* — that is, on a social perception, widely shared across western European culture, that our sexual identity is not about moral choice but about ‘orientation’. This is, I believe, a genuine and significant shift in moral perception, taken by deeply serious and ethically responsible young people. But it raises acutely the question of the relationship between an authoritative religious text from the past – the Bible – and a society whose understanding of sexuality and gender roles is rapidly changing. As a result, many young people (under 45!) are simply walking away from a church they regard as ‘evil’ and a Bible that belongs to a world they don’t recognise, speaking with the voices of prejudice and oppression. [Woodhead & Warner 2014: 24].

### **2. The hermeneutical issue: Scripture, tradition and reason.**

But ‘walking away’ from the Bible is not an option for me, or for the Church. We have to find a way of making sense of it, in a world that is very different from the world in which it was written. This is one of the key theological tasks facing us in the church today. [Alexander 2006A] ‘Reason’ in this debate not just an abstract process of logical deduction but a way of paying attention to the world. (Cf. Hooker: ‘It is an error to think that the only law which God hath appointed unto men ... is the sacred scripture’ [Bauckham & Drewery 1988: 294]) Not all moral shifts are godless: some of them (slavery is a case in point) may actually owe something to the effects of centuries of Christian thinking within society. Scripture itself bears witness to a hermeneutic of ‘contemporization’ that starts by paying attention to what God is doing in the world before trying to make sense of it within a scriptural framework. Acts 10-15 points us towards a hermeneutic of *attentiveness*, reading scripture as the word of the living God, a revelation whose meaning is not exhausted by its original context but must be read in dialogue with what God is doing in the present. [Alexander 2006B]

### **3. Same-sex relations in the Bible**

3.1 *Context*: The ethics of same-sex relations in the biblical writers are consistent with their anthropology of desire, which sees same-sex attraction as a moral disorder, a voluntary choice made by heterosexual people, thus an expression of uncontrolled and often aggressive sexual desire. This is clear from the language they use.

3.2 *Canon*: Why *these* texts? Why should they exercise such a controlling force over the biblical canon as a whole? We need to read the OT in light of the Gospel.

3.3 *Culture*: Paul’s reading of same-sex relations reflects the cultural scripts of his own context. Starting from the fundamental perception that same-sex proclivity is a voluntary moral choice exercised by heterosexual people, ancient moralists saw it as an expression of violent and excessive sexual desire (*pathos*), frequently used as an

tool of domination. It represented an ‘unnatural’ confusion of gender roles, and thus a distortion of the social hierarchies built into marriage and household. It belonged to the shadow-world of extra-marital sexual relations, thus necessarily unfaithful, impermanent, uncommitted; and was most likely to be encountered in the form of prostitution or abuse within the household. For Paul, homosexual activity would fall under the category *porneia* (‘bad sex’) because it is either abusive (abuse within the family unit, including slave-rape) or commercially exploitative (prostitution).

#### 4. Towards a Christian sexual ethic

If we could stop using Paul’s letters to fight our gender wars, we might be able to make much better use of them for constructing a genuinely Christian sexual ethic — something our confused generation desperately needs. In order to do that, we have to read the Bible *historically; dialogically; and counter-culturally*.

##### 4.1 Sex and marriage in the Gospels [Loader 2005]

Jesus affirms marriage as a God-given, creation institution (Mk 10.2-12). He sets radically high standards of sexual fidelity and commitment (Matt 5.27-32). In light of the disciples’ protests, he allows ‘pastoral accommodations’ (at least in Matthew — not in Mark). Divorce is allowed in the case of adultery (Mt 19.9-10); marriage is not for all (Mt 19.11-12). But Jesus himself is not married, and he downplays the importance of family ties (Mk 3.31-35). [Osiek & Balch 1997] He teaches clearly that marriage is not part of the ‘new creation’ in the world to come (Mk 12.24-25).

##### 4.2 Bad sex and good sex: 1 Corinthians 5-7. [Deming 1995; Alexander 1998]

In 1 Corinthians 5-7 Paul is seeking to mediate between ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ views (6.12, 7.1). Like Jesus, he affirms the ‘one flesh’ of Genesis 2.24, applying it not only to sex within marriage but to all sexual encounters (6.16). On this view, there is no such thing as ‘casual sex.’ All sexual acts are significant: but their significance can be either destructive or affirmative. The two examples he deals with of “bad sex”/*porneia* are both heterosexual: sexual abuse (incest) within the family (5.1); and sex with a prostitute (6.16) — sex without commitment, commercial sex.

In ch.7 Paul deals with a question from the Corinthians about mixed marriages (marriage with a pagan spouse). Does this compromise the holiness of the community (7.12-16)? Not for Paul: in a mixed marriage, the sexual act is ‘holy’ and has the capacity to sanctify (make holy) both non-Christian partners and their children (7.14). What makes these relationships ‘holy’? Paul is not talking about ‘Christian’ marriage (no such thing existed at the time). He is not arguing (like many Stoic philosophers of the time) that procreation is what authenticates sex in marriage (for Paul, the marriage makes the children ‘holy,’ not the other way round). He is not arguing here that marriage protects the social hierarchies, but goes out of his way to stress reciprocal relationships between husband and wife: ‘The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality – the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to ‘stand up for your rights’. Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out’ (7.3-4, *The Message*) What makes these marriages ‘holy’ is a combination of legality; fidelity; stability; and mutuality.

##### 4.3 Pastoral accommodations: singleness, celibacy and divorce

But marriage is not the only option: Paul’s own preference is for celibacy. This is not purely pragmatic (7.26): it reflects the lifestyle of the age to come. It was celibacy that became the distinctive lifestyle option of early Christianity, and gave young

Christians (especially young women) a platform to exercise their refusal to be conformed to the world. [Cooper 2013] But celibacy is not a practical option for everyone, and is not to be imposed on those who have not the gift for it (7.7). It is better that sexual desire should be ‘quenched’ (i.e. satisfied) in marriage than left to ‘burn’ (7.9). We might say therefore that for Paul, marriage itself is a kind of pastoral accommodation to human sexual needs. It is worth noting that for Paul there is a kind of ‘grey area’ which falls short of the ideal (7.7) — but is not a sin (7.28, 36). Paul also allows divorce (in certain circumstances) as a kind of ‘third-best’ pastoral accommodation, even though he knows it was forbidden by the Lord (7.10-11). And he valorises singleness in both men and women (again, a deeply counter-cultural stance: 7.32-35).

### **5. Where does this leave the church today?**

Both sides in this debate affirm their commitment to resisting homophobia and welcoming ‘LGBT’ people into the church. This implies that we accept sexual orientation as in some way a ‘given’ of our sexual identity — a construction of sexuality that is radically different from that of the biblical world.

The ‘conservative’ side argues that though Paul does not condemn ‘homosexuality’ as such, he does prohibit homosexual practice. Therefore there is nothing wrong with experiencing same-sex attraction, only with homosexual practice. This sounds clear and logical — but is it? It overlooks the fact that the Bible is not a culture-free zone. Ethics and anthropology are inextricably linked. Paul’s condemnation of homosexual practice is a logical consequence of his construction of sexuality — a construction derived from his own first-century cultural world. Sever the connection, and the moral condemnation is without foundation.

But once we accept homosexual orientation as a ‘given,’ it makes no sense to base our sexual ethic on a first-century anthropology of desire that sees it as a moral disorder. (The gospels treat epilepsy as a form of demon-possession: but we don’t use that first-century medical diagnosis as a basis for treatment today.) What we need is a sexual ethic that starts from the recognition (which both sides share) that sexual orientation *per se* is neither immoral nor defective, but a ‘given’ of sexual identity. All sexual relationships have enormous potential for good or ill. Many kinds of homosexual practice (then and now) would fall under Paul’s condemnation of ‘bad sex,’ *porneia*: but then, so do many kinds of heterosexual practice (which is what Paul mostly talks about). We need to disentangle the *ethics* of sexuality from the question of *sexual identity* or ‘who you sleep with’ (as Paul begins to do in 1 Cor 7).

The question then is, what should be our response to a homosexual relationship that corresponds in all other respects to the pattern of ‘good sex’ that Paul sets out in 1 Cor 7 — that is, a permanent, faithful, stable relationship that is legally sanctioned by the law of the land? Can we construct a biblically-based theology that would allow LGBT people to engage in committed sexual relationships and to find in them a source of grace?

The Swiss reformer Martin Bucer, commenting on Cranmer’s 1549 marriage service, says: “Three causes for matrimony are enumerated, that is children, a remedy, and mutual help, and I should prefer what is placed third among the causes for marriage might be in the first place, because it is first.” Cranmer’s first cause, procreation

(‘children’) takes us back to Gen 2.24. But the imperative to procreation does not play a definitive role in Paul’s teaching on marriage in 1 Cor 7 — nor in the teaching of the Church of England, which allows the use of contraception (and permits marriage for those unable to have children). Cranmer’s second cause, a ‘remedy for sin,’ picks up Paul’s view of marriage itself as a form of ‘pastoral accommodation’ for those unable to endure the rigours of the celibate life (“Better to marry than to burn” — i.e. with unrequited passion.) Unfashionable as it is, there is a practical pastoral insight here that has a very obvious relevance to the pre-1980s gay scene, where the lack of recognition made it all but impossible to create stable relationships.

But Cranmer also picks up on the counter-cultural assumptions in Gen 2.24 — that marriage is about ‘mutual comfort, society and help’. Marriage entails a dual action of ‘leaving’ and ‘cleaving,’ a walking away from previous family ties that creates a new unit, a new covenant, a new space for companionship with God. For Paul it is this mutual trust and commitment that is definitive to ‘good sex’. This perspective is echoed in an earlier statement of the House of Bishops:

A true marriage reflects Christ’s own love for us all. He too gave himself to others, ‘for better, for worse, till death.’ In it we learn to break down our pride and self-concern, to be open to our partner as he or she really is, to treasure what is good, and forgive faults, to be loyal, whatever the price ... A good marriage creates for each partner the same kind of environment which we recognize as promoting growth to maturity in the case of children: a combination of love and challenge within an unbreakably reliable relationship. [John 2000]

It seems perverse to deny these benefits to those same-sex couples who aspire to live a life of fidelity, mutuality and commitment. Where LGBT couples *want* to reach out to this recognisably Christian ideal, why should the church deny them?

#### SHORT BOOKLIST

- A fuller version of this paper can be found in *Grace and Disagreement 2: A Reader* (Church House Publishing, 2015), pp.24-51.
- Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).
- Loveday Alexander, ‘God’s Frozen Word: Canonicity and the Dilemmas of Biblical Studies Today’, *Expository Times* 117/6 (2006A), pp.237-42.
- Loveday Alexander, “‘This is That’: The Authority of Scripture in the Acts of the Apostles,” in Aaron Son (ed.), *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for His 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006B), pp.55-72.
- Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (ed.). *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).
- Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013).
- Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2003).
- Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (SNTSMS 83; CUP 1995).
- Jeffrey John, *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* (London: DLT 2000; re-issued 2013).
- William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); idem, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the key texts* (London: SPCK 2010).
- Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988).
- Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 123-43.
- Pilling 2013: *The Pilling Report (GS 1929): Report of the House of Bishops Working Party on human sexuality* (Church House Publishing, 2013).
- Linda Woodhead and Rob Warner, ‘Church Health Check,’ *Church Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2014.