

NEAC 4
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The New Testament Speaks on Same-Sex Eroticism

A faithful reading of scripture is crucial to understanding the issue before us. Scripture is, of course, key to the thinking of the Christian. While we are first of all people of Christ, we are also people of the Book. It is most particularly in the Bible that the supreme glory of our Lord is shown so that the Church can together know the One who is the Truth, and therefore worship together.

To read scripture as it is meant to be read, we begin with an understanding of its character. It is not a static deposit of precepts to be mined, but a vibrant collection of books by which the Church is taught, and *by which she is identified*. The story of scripture can be understood in five great acts : Act 1 tells us about a creator God; Act 2 speaks of his good creation gone askew by death, corruption and sin; Act 3 presents the call of the nation Israel to be a light to the world, Act 4 shows how that calling was fulfilled in a surprising and crucial way in the coming, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ; Act 5, in which we find ourselves, describes the ongoing life and healing mission of the church through the Holy Spirit in this world. We await the finale of this drama, but are given, in the Scriptures, wonderful intimations of God's purposes for his people and the entire cosmos.

The Bible came to us in human words, particular to time and place. Some have used this human element to detract from the Bible's authority, and to leash or neutralise its words on difficult subjects. Far be this from us! Rather, we discern in the Bible's many forms - narrative, law, gospel, psalm, epistle, apocalypse – God's coming to be with us, for us and in us. Let us learn this story intimately, so that we can repeat it with human lips to others, and so that we can play our authentic part in it. This “we” factor is essential! The scripture implies, and indeed states explicitly, that the Word is heard not privately, but by the whole community, past and present. When we as today's faith community recognise,

understand and pass on what has been revealed, we are using the God-given faculty of reason. Our experience and reason are not actual "authorities" as we understand scripture or decide about present concerns. Instead, experience (especially the common experience of the church) is our *context*, the place where we receive God's love and wisdom; reason is a "tool" or means of interpreting what we hear. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and steeped in the written Word of God, we measure the helpfulness of current ideas against a long established understanding of God, the world, and humanity, to see if they stand up to the test.

As members of Christ's body, we are ourselves actors in a divinely conceived drama. While our "lines" are not wholly prescribed for us, our role is *not* to improvise with abandon, mindless of the story line. In reading the scriptures together, and by honouring the "actors" who have gone before us, we keep within our memories and hearts the central, major "part" in the drama – God's part! As those who have received the Spirit, we will want to share in the mind of Christ, understanding the word personally, but not autonomously or individualistically. The church has, from the beginning, struggled over difficult matters. Her reflection and solemn decisions about ethical and theological matters should be acknowledged as carrying authority for us younger brothers and sisters in the same family. Together with God's whole church, past and present, we are called to discern God's voice and will, in humility and in confidence that the Holy Spirit was active, is active and will be active in our midst.

The human authors of the scriptures, moved by the Divine Author, wrote in particular historical contexts. But this fact should not be used as a pretext for bypassing explicit teaching or perspectives which our age finds difficult. Rather, in each case, we are to read all the pertinent texts carefully. Even where we conclude that a passage is particular to a moment in the history of God's people (e.g. prohibition of pork, or head coverings for women), we must respect the underlying theological or ethical truths. Some commands have an enduring claim (e.g. the command not to murder) because they are essentially linked to what has been revealed in the salvation story about the world, our nature, and the nature of God. A faithful reading of scriptures thus means that we seek to understand

how the passages that we are reading, and the questions that we are presently asking, fit into the great forgiving, healing and life-giving drama that has been initiated by God himself.

How do the scriptures speak of human sexuality? We take our cue from the Lord Jesus, who answered questions about human relations by going back to the creation narrative. There we learn that our created sexual differences are key to our identity as human beings. The solemn declaration of Genesis 1:27 stresses both difference and unity: "So God created adam in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." Sexual distinctions and complementarity are part of God's good (very good! 1:31) creation, though sexuality, along with other facets of human life, has been deeply affected by sin.

So powerful is this communion of male and female that the Bible treats marriage as a mirror of God's love for his people. This understanding of marriage is accentuated in New Testament, where it is celebrated as an icon of Christ's mysterious love for the Church. Another surprise in the NT is that celibacy comes to be honoured there as a faithful way of celebrating God's goodness. Marriage is a wonderful echo of God's communion with us; celibacy stands as a potent reminder that here not all our needs can be met by another human being, that we are designed for something more than this age. In Matthew 19 and Mark 10 Jesus affirms both celibacy and monogamous marriage -- "What God has joined together let no one put asunder". Our generation has already seen an assault on God's order by the tragic prevalence of divorce in the Church. It would seem that the tumultuous call for us to "bless" so-called same-sex "unions" is a new way of "putting asunder" what God has joined! Jesus, asked about marriage by his Jewish contemporaries, had no need to speak explicitly about homoeroticism (this had not entered their minds!). The Genesis creation account to which he refers speaks clearly about God's intent for human partnership between male and female.

What Jesus did not need to explicitly address is certainly addressed by his apostle, St. Paul, who lived and worked in a Gentile context. Like Jesus, St. Paul teaches that there

are two Christian lifestyles -- marriage is so honourable that a godly partner may hope to influence an unbelieving spouse; singleness is a special gift to the community of the church. Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul shows how our most intimate inter-relationships may become part of God's medicine. Neither an unlawful heterosexual relationship (such as incest) nor a same-sex union can ultimately fulfil this role, however. Paul speaks about "freedom" in the area of food, but never suggests that incest or other types of sexual immorality could be an authentic expression of freedom in Christ. This is because marriage by its very character, requires faithful complementarity, not the intimacy of same types nor casual intimacy. In Christ, our sexuality, expressed in a monogamous physical union, or expressed chastely by single persons in means other than those that are erotic, becomes a powerful factor in helping us to be healed, and to grow up into what we are meant to be. Amidst current assumptions that sexuality is for the purpose of self-gratification, the Church is called to signal to the world an entirely different attitude. Paul was scandalized that the Corinthians were allowing a member of their church to engage in incest (1 Cor. 5). We have our own scandal today, and need again to head Paul's words -- "Do not be deceived!"

Frequently pro-gay lobbies in the Church speak about same-sex eroticism as if the Bible has little to say regarding it, and as if the biblical writers were naive. They refer to, say, the institution of slavery, and suggest that we have moved beyond the limited understanding of the early Church. These arguments betray an arrogance with regards to the Biblical text, and miss the mark. To begin with, homoerotic behaviour is not analogous to slavery, nor even to the ministry of women in the Church, for that matter. Though some portions of the epistles deal with slavery as a given in the ancient world, 1 Timothy 1:10 lists slave-trading as a vice, and Paul invites slaves to take freedom when they can. What Scriptures have to say about women in ministry is, in my view, complex, but to link this debate with the homosexuality issue is a "category confusion." As my colleague Robert Gagnon has put it "being a woman is not a condition directly linked to sinful behaviour, as is homoerotic desire." (Robert Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*).

Nor were the biblical writers ignorant of homoeroticism, though they did not express the phenomenon in the psychological language of our day. Indeed, in St. Paul's time, there were some who celebrated homoerotic relations as a good thing. Some prominent Gentiles thought and acted this way, but neither the Hebrew people nor the early Christians agreed. The Bible speaks with one voice about homoerotic activity – from the story of Sodom, to the "Holiness Code" of Leviticus, to the lists of dark behaviours in the epistles, the word is, "don't!" The biblical writers adopt a decisive counter-cultural stand against an activity that Greek and Roman poets valorised. It makes little difference whether such sexual behaviour is directed by nature, by nurture, or by a combination of these two. St. Paul himself is well aware of the compulsive nature of sin, and puts forth the gospel as God's means of dealing with enslaved expressions of sinfulness as well as sins that are deliberately chosen. Jesus Christ is the center of healing as well as of acquittal, our Physician as well as our gracious Judge. To say that the apostle would change his mind if he knew the "findings" of psychological sciences regarding homosexuality is to ignore that the Bible understands well our brokenness and our inclination to destructive behaviour.

Both the Lord Jesus and St. Paul, then, describe erotic expression as something blessed by God uniquely within the institution of a faithful marriage. Jesus makes clear that "*from the beginning ... God made them male and female*" and so defines marriage for our confused age as the union of two *differently gendered* human beings. Would that those entrenching law in Canada would listen! In Romans 1: 18-32, the apostle Paul also hearkens back to the creation story (and to the story of the Fall). Read 20-25. Here Paul presents us with a progression: lack of honour and thanksgiving to God has led to ignorance and idolatry, which has led to lustful hearts, which has led to the degradation of the body. The most foundational example of this degradation is homoeroticism (including lesbianism), because this presents a primal breach in the "male and female" humanity that God declared to be very good. Homoeroticism, then, is pictured as symptomatic of the first rebellion against God. It, along with other symptoms such as covetousness, murder, strife, gossip, deceit, disloyalty and pride, show that human beings have, together, turned away from the God of glory.

Notice that Paul is not talking here about individual persons who have homoerotic desires, but of the phenomenon itself, which is an indicator of our fallen human nature. Together, the human family has turned away from the creator, refusing to give thanks. We bear, as a race, the wounds of those who will not rejoice in what God has made, and in who we are. Homoerotic activity, because of its character *against nature* does not affirm God's created order as given to us-- that is, he has made us "male and female." So, in homoerotic action, as in other wrong paths, we show that humanity has forgotten the true God of creation. It seems that the first sin of Adam and Eve was neither pride nor simple disobedience, but lack of gratitude! The result is ignorance, idolatry, degradation of body and mind and finally the confusion of evil for good – "they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them" (1 Cor. 1:32).

In the Corinthian letters, St. Paul singles out sexual immorality as a sin that can affect the whole person, and urges his hearers to flee from it (1 Cor. 6:18). He also details both active and passive homo-erotic activity in a list of vices which the Corinthians *once* practiced before their turn to Christ, and which they must now eschew (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Some recent commentators, through special pleading, seek to reinterpret or to limit St. Paul's use of two terms for homosexual agents -- those who are *malakoi*, and those who are *arsenokoitai*. The latter term *arsenokoitai* is a word found only in Paul, but clearly a compound derived from the Old Greek Leviticus (Lev. 20:13) which speaks of "those who lie with a male as with a female." The term *malakoi* is less technical, and means literally "soft ones;" it is found in other Greek documents to refer to those exhibiting various types of sexual indulgence, but often refers explicitly to the passive partner in a homo-erotic relationship. Those in doubt should research for themselves the more general cultural use of this term, as documented in, for example, the standard Greek dictionaries. Careful and non-biased studies of these words show that Paul's meaning is all-too-clear. He uses these words to refer to homoerotic behaviour in general, not simply to "boy prostitution" or "forced" relations, or "homosexual activity between naturally heterosexual partners," as some want to argue.

In line with the New Testament, early Christian communities retained this same view regarding sexual immorality, including same-sex erotic activity. Right up through to the

mid twentieth century, Christian theologians including Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Karl Barth have understood homoerotic behaviour as a sign of the disruption of the good created order, and as a sin which calls for repentance, restoration and healing. Sometimes, of course, leaders in the Church have fallen prey to self-justification, and have vilified those engaging in same-sex sin as worse than those indulging in other sins. The New Testament is quick to correct us if we are self-righteous, without softening its words against homoerotic behaviour itself. “And such” said St. Paul, “were some of you. But you have been washed.”

(Please let me add a quick word on what “healing” might entail – for some, it may well mean reorientation, and we have friends who have testified to this; for others, celibacy will be the path of healing, offering a path of witness to many who think that sexual expression is a necessity for a fulfilled life. I am profoundly grateful to my brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with same-sex desire but witness in their lives to the sufficiency of Christ; they remind me that we cannot yet imagine all that God has in store for us, and that his grace is sufficient to meet us in our brokenness. Nor will he leave us there—we await “temples” that will take up into glory these “tents” in which we now dwell.)

Thus we can summarize the Church’s faithful reading of the Scripture in this way: those struggling with homoeroticism are to be included in the community of faith, along with the rest of us sinners. God’s grace is extended to all. However, anyone who joins such the household of God should know that it is a place of transformation, discipline, and learning - *not a place to be falsely comforted or indulged*. Christ’s body is to be truly inclusive, extending to all her members the benefits of membership, including confession, repentance, forgiveness and healing. Jesus’ gospel remains: Repent, for the rule of God is at hand!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who learned the depth of God’s grace in a dark time, speaks powerfully to us about ethics, reality and truth: "If one is to say how a thing really is, *i.e.* if one is to speak truthfully, one’s gaze and one’s thought must be directed towards the way in which the real exists in God and through God and for God" (*Ethics*, ET 1955, p.

365). Bonhoeffer thus sends us back to Romans 1 and further back to Genesis 1 through 3, that we might see God's world, the creation, and human sexuality as they really are. God's creation is good, though flawed: his purpose is to redeem, heal and glorify it.

But there are some who will not see it this way. Instead they want us to put skewed human experience in place of Jesus, Paul, and the historic Church, and to declare that we have transcended the clear voice of Scripture on this issue. In place of the communion of saints and the teaching of the apostles they put a new gospel of so-called inclusivity, and tell us to bless what needs to be healed. What would it mean for the Anglican communion to acknowledge a person involved in same-sex eroticism as a godly example? What would it mean to bless same-sex erotic arrangements? It would be to declare that these so-called "unions" are in themselves pictures or icons of God's love, to say that they display the salvation story, to rejoice that that they are glorified or taken up into God's own actions and being. It would be to declare that they have a significant and fruitful part in creation, and that they are symbols of the in-breaking and coming rule of God, in which the Church now shares and in which we will eventually participate fully. It would be to "speak a good word" about this sort of relationship, explicitly declaring it to be a condition in which the way of the cross and the way of new life come together. Precisely here, the Church would be saying, you can see the love of God in human form, and the glory of humanity. It would be to name God as the one who blesses an act for which in fact *repentance* is required. So we would replace God with an idol, and so we would rend the Church. What will the Church do when it prays against itself? A house divided cannot stand.

The prophet Jeremiah knew a day like ours.

*They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.
Thus says the Lord:
Stand at the crossroads, and look
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.
But they said, "We will not walk in it."*

*How can you say, "We are wise,
and the law of the Lord is with us,"
when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes
has made it into a lie?
The wise shall be put to shame,
and taken;
since they have rejected the word of the Lord,
what wisdom is there in them?
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.
For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there? (Jeremiah 6:14-16; 8:8-22)*

“You therefore, beloved, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability...[Rather] be attentive to the [word] as to a lamp shining in a dark place.”