

# HOMOSEXUALITY & THE CHURCH

## Some Christian Reflections on Scripture, Gospel & Church

### Part I - INTRODUCTION

Beneath the relationships of homosexuality and the Church lie some very deep Gospel-themes which are constantly ignored, but which should be taken into account by holders of all views.

This article begins with a back-to-basics reminder of them.

We have much to learn from the *context* of the New Testament’s main texts which mention homosexuality, (as well as off-setting the tendency of some to hurl single verses as weapons of war!) Note, however, that in the New Testament passages concerned the authors are writing about life-styles, so chaste homosexual *orientation* is not mentioned since it is no problem for them.

The three ‘homosexual’ references come in –

**Romans 1**

**1 Corinthians 6**

**1 Timothy 1**

(Ideally, I would like you to read these chapters next and so get the *feel* of the Scriptural emphases for yourself – I think they will surprise you.)

## Part II - THE SICKNESS OF HUMANITY

### ROMANS 1

In Romans 1 to 8, St. Paul expounds his view of the Gospel. He is careful to put the Christian Good News in its context. Like a doctor, Paul sees God’s remedy sandwiched within an obvious sequence –

Sickness	1:19-3:20
<i>Remedy</i>	3:21-3:26
Recovery	3:27-8:39

Paul first describes the human ‘sickness’, for he knows that only those who realise they are *sick* have any reason to avail themselves of an offered remedy. Unless humanity is alerted to the bad news of its true condition (1:19-3:20), it will ignore the Good News of God’s offered salvation (3:21-3:26).

The sadness of the human condition is but a necessary prelude to the glorious cure of the Gospel. Indeed, Paul is so excited by the power of the Gospel-remedy, that it bubbles out of him even *before* he catalogues the symptoms of the ‘sickness’! –

I am not ashamed of the gospel.

***It is the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation...***

[Romans 1:16, New American Bible, Italics mine]

St. Paul mentioned homosexuality as but one item in a vast cluster of all-too-familiar things which characterize humanity without Christ : *idolatry – impiety – wickedness – vanity – impurity – lust – degradation of bodies – rejection of truth – degraded passions – unnatural relations – lust – lack of mental discernment – improper acts – wickedness – greed – malice – envy – murder – rivalry – treachery – spite – gossip – scandalmongering – hating God – insolence – haughtiness – boasting – ingenious wickedness – rebellion against parents – senselessness – faithlessness – heartlessness – ruthlessness.*

see verses 24 – 31. (These are my nouns based on the N.A.B. translation)

St. Paul could have extended his list endlessly, since his main point in his section on humanity’s sickness without Christ is summed-up in his punch-line from Psalm 14 – *There is none righteous – no not one!* (3:10). Against the pure whiteness of God’s holiness – *all* humanity is a muddy grey! For *All have sinned and fallen-short of the glory of God.* (3:23)

### 1 CORINTHIANS 6

As in Romans 1, so here. Homosexuality, although loathed by Jews, is not singled-out, but listed among a myriad of symptoms of the state in which God’s creatures are out-of-key with

their Creator. This second list is, like the first, not a complete check-list but a typical cross section, and includes :

*injustice – fornication – idolatry – adultery – boy prostitution – practising homosexuality – theft – greed – drunkenness – slander – robbery.* (see verses 9-10)

## 1 TIMOTHY 1

In this chapter is the last mention of homosexuality in the N.T. Yet again it occurs in a *list*. The Law, we are taught, must be understood not as something meant for the righteous person, but for those who are : *lawless – unruly – godless – sinful – unholy – profane – parent-murderers – unchaste – practising homosexuals – kidnappers – liars – perjurers – opponents of sound teaching.* (see verses 9-10)

## LEARNING FROM THE CONTEXTS

What do the *contexts* of the three homosexual references in the New Testament (Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:9-10) teach us?

- That humanity is universally ‘grey’ against the whiteness of God’s holiness.
- That as God is ‘righteous’, humanity is therefore *un-righteous*. This state of ‘sick’ condition has various other terms to describe it, e.g. *falling short* (used 250 times in the New Testament); *trespass*; *sin*; *iniquity*; *transgression*; and *ungodliness*.
- That although God’s Law was given to turn humanity from *un-righteousness* to righteousness, it lacked the power for the necessary transformation.
- That our *falling-short* of God’s glory & holiness is universal.
- That there are countless signs of this, just one of which is practising homosexuality. Its mention will have been a reassurance to some that their activities were –
  - (a) not beyond nor outside the *general* ‘unrighteousness’ of humanity,
  - (b) but still *within* the arms of God’s love, and thus
  - (c) *within* the scope and power of God’s salvation.

The principal point that emerges from these Scriptural *contexts* is this : the New Testament’s *first* (but not only) point is that there is **NO ‘US’ and ‘THEM’**. There is only ‘**US**’!

Christians in particular, must be *extremely* careful that any natural tendency to think of practising homosexuals in terms of US and THEM does not eclipse this New Testament emphasis that there is only ‘US’! There have never been any ‘them’ over whom we can feel

superior, nor have we any righteousness of our own of which we might be proud. Any distinction is not due to our lesser badness or greater goodness but wholly to God’s offer and our acceptance of his *un*-deserved grace.

The sad catalogues of *un*-righteousness (in which homosexual practices are mentioned) are the symptoms of the human state in which every single one of us once was. The terrible lists of unrighteousness *describe our ‘birthplace’*. (They should not describe our destiny, because God’s remedy and power-to-overcome lie in Jesus and his Spirit.)

### Part III - THE REMEDY OF GOD

One of the most important words in Scripture and a key-word of the Gospel is

#### ‘BUT’

One has only to think of –

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish  
BUT may have everlasting life*

and -

*For the wages of sin is death,  
BUT the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

In these, and many other instances, the ‘BUT’ signals the great transition between two opposite states. Scripture gives us a rich description of each of the two in contrast to the other. Below is a selection of such contrasting pairs from New Testament writers. Each pair is *before* Gospel and *after* Gospel (for Biblical references see Appendix A):

(Before) : (After)	(Before) : (After)
Enemies and aliens : Life & Godliness	Hostile to God : Obedience to righteousness
Spirit of Slavery : Spirit of Adoption	Condemned : Spiritually minded
Fleshly-minded : Purified	Sin : Cleansed
Sin : Reconciled & Holy	Darkness : Eternal Life
Dead : Light	from Death : Life with Jesus
Death : to God	Under Satan : to Life
Born : Born again	Divided : United
Bondage : Adoption	Far off : New Creation
Hostility : Peace	Sinners : Christ
Under law : Righteous	Self : Reconciled
Old : Access to God	Corruption & lust : Spiritual

The left hand of each pair is the human state without Christ: the right hand of each pair describes the transformation by the Gospel which is the **POWER of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation.** [Romans 1:16]

Every homosexual reference in the New Testament is firmly within the context of the Good News of the Gospel – a good model and reminder! After each of the three references the writer introduces God’s *remedy* with a typical ‘BUT’...

In Romans, 3:21-24 St. Paul writes –

***BUT now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ...***

In Corinthians 6:11

After the *un*-righteous list (quoted above in Part II) comes:

***That is what some of you used to be,  
BUT you have been washed,  
BUT you were sanctified,  
BUT you were justified  
in the name of the Lord Jesus  
and in the Spirit of our God.***

[Note: Some recent translations have opted for smoothness of style and dropped the triple emphasis of the original BUT... BUT... BUT.]

The Gospel-transformations of God’s remedy are made clear:

1. Fully cleansed from sin (‘washed’)
2. Set apart from God and being made holy (‘sanctified’)
3. Being totally accepted in God’s sight (‘justified’)

In Timothy 1:13-15

This time the great Gospel ‘BUT’ is illustrated from the writer’s personal experience –

**I WAS ONCE A BLASPHEMER AND A PERSECUTOR ...**

***BUT I have been mercifully treated ... the grace of God has been abundant, along with the faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is trustworthy and deserved full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.***

Homosexuality cannot be assessed rightly unless we *first* place it where the New Testament writers do. That is to say –

- BUT**
- i) as one of countless signs of condemned Humanity’s *un*-righteousness without God,
  - ii) as one of countless signs of a Humanity which God offers to save, deliver, redeem, adopt, empower and transform.

## Part IV - THE OLD TESTAMENT

Since the Old Testament is pre-Gospel it adds little to the pre-gospel picture of the human sickness given in the New Testament. Righteousness and purity could not be achieved in society – even by imposing the oft-quoted death penalty.

[If a man lies with a male 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 Old Testament wields the power of the Law to guide, condemn or punish, but lacks the saving power of the Gospel to deliver and transform. So also do a few Christians who *confine* their response to homosexuality by quoting texts devoid of the Gospel. Their quotations are certainly ‘from Scripture’ but such a response, **devoid of God’s Gospel-remedy**, is not truly Biblical for it is contrary to the full proclamation of a **New Testament**.

Judging by the three ‘homosexual’ lists quoted above, Scripture teaches us that humanity’s sickness is shown by :

*idolatry, impiety, wickedness, vanity, impurity, lust, bodily degradation, rejection of truth, degraded passions, unnatural relations, lust, lack of mental discernment, improper acts, greed, malice, envy, murder, rivalry, treachery, spite, gossip, scandalmongering, hating God, insolence, haughtiness, boasting, ingenious wickedness, rebellion against parents, senselessness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness, injustice, fornication, adultery, boy prostitution, theft, drunkenness, slander, robbery, lawlessness, unruliness, godlessness, sin, unholiness, profanity, parent-murder, unchastity, kidnapping, lying, perjury, opposing sound teaching.*

If we allow homosexuality to get divorced from all the other signs of humanity’s sickness, then we do a dis-service to homosexuals and heterosexuals alike – all of whom must be aware of where their lives and attitudes fall-short of the glory of God, and so be alerted fully to avail themselves of God’s remedy through Christ.

## Part V - HOMOSEXUALS AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP

That some today are demanding that practising homosexuals should not automatically be barred from positions of Church leadership arises mainly because of the following eight convictions being held. I expect you will recognise them. (After listing them I shall comment briefly on each.)

- 1) That homosexuality is radically different from all other signs of humanity’s ‘sickness’.
- 2) That homosexual orientation must find its fulfilment in same-sex practices.
- 3) That an individual’s ‘rights’ matter above all else.
- 4) That the Church in society need be no different from it.
- 5) That the Church, like society is a democracy.
- 6) That the Church’s leaders should, therefore, be representative.
- 7) That what in Britain is ‘usual’ Christianity is ‘normal’.
- 8) That the complete pagan-to-Christian ‘switch’ and transformation basic to the New Testament is, in our ‘Christian country’, unnecessary, unlikely, impossible, and/or optional.

Most would agree that the demand for the Ordination of practising homosexuals arises from these eight convictions. Opinion is sharply divided on the issue because of dis-agreement about which of the eight convictions are *valid*.

The Ordination of practising homosexuals is right if these convictions are valid, wrong if they are not.

You must make your own responses to the validity of each.

My own position is this:

- a) I seriously question the validity of all eight of the convictions.  
(I have summarised my responses for you to mull over below.)
- b) I feel a profound unease at any Christian responses to this issue, which sound Scriptural, but seem devoid of the Gospel of God’s love and the promise of its transforming power.
- c) I realise the difficulties for those of homosexual orientation in our society, and am angry at the semi-political, media and cultural pressures upon them to conform to some ‘gay’ image, often, I feel, not really of their free choosing.

Here is a summary of my reactions to the eight convictions that assume practising homosexuals may be ordained.

**1) I question whether homosexuality is radically different from any of the other signs of humanity’s ‘sickness’?**

The New Testament certainly has no such hint. If the homosexual orientation is unyielding and conditioned by genes, biological programming, chemical imbalance, heredity, environment, etc., surely such factors sometimes apply to the fifty-plus other states listed in Part IV.

Some practising homosexuals have sought Christ’s healing and found it. This invalidates the assumption that homosexuality is an ideal ‘God made’ state, since God would not change it if it was. It is no more ideal or God-made than the fifty-plus other states.

**2) I question whether homosexuality must find its ‘fulfilment’?**

This ‘right’ is based on the invalid assumption of No. 1 above. If homosexuality must be ‘fulfilled’ as of individual right, so must *lust, greed, murder, treachery, impurity, adultery, theft, etc.* regardless of morals, integrity, the good of family and society.

**3) I question that an individual’s ‘right’ matters above all else?**

It certainly matters, of course – but not above all else!

For example; the Nazis had no ‘rights’ to mass-exterminate. Rights, however strongly felt, have to be subject to moral laws, theirs were not. One of my ‘rights’ might clash head-on with one of yours. Neither of us can enjoy unrestricted ‘rights’.

**4) I question that the Church is in essence no different from society.**

In a persecuting society the distinction is usually clear. In a Church-accepting society, however, where anyone can call him/herself a ‘Christian’, nominal Christianity is widespread. When this happens, the Church’s essence becomes blurred to Christian and non-Christian alike.

Rightly understood the Church is almost the *inversion* of society. The early Christians were accused of turning the whole world upside-down (Acts 17:6). The New Testament has many such themes: In losing their lives, Christians save them! (Mark 8:34-35), in dying, they live! (2 Corinthians 6:9), in weakness they are strong! (2 Corinthians 12:9), in persecution they are blessed! (Matthew 5:10). They are to be society’s salt and its light (Matthew 5:13-14). They are not to conform to it (Romans 12:2).

**5) I question the assumption that a true Church is democratic.**

A *demo*-cracy is rule by the people. If true, its authority comes ‘upwards’ from the grass-roots to authorize action by its leaders. Scripture teaches that the Church is the opposite of a people-ruled *demo*-cracy: she is called-out to be a *theo*-cracy, i.e. God-ruled. God is her authority (‘from above’). She exists to obey him, and that is her members’ calling. While her voting might suggest democracy, it is used not for ‘majority rule’, but in an attempt corporately to discern God’s will.

**6) I question whether Church leaders should be a cross representation of society.**  
This arises from the wrong assumption (5 above) that the Church is a democracy.

Imagine your local Alcoholic's Anonymous group were voting for a President. It would be *appropriate* for them to select a member whose life now demonstrated *deliverance* from alcoholism rather than of bondage to it. To do so would not be intolerant or discriminatory. To do otherwise would be daft!

In a similar way, God seems to choose his Church's leaders from those whose lives enjoy some deliverance from 'unrighteousness' rather than from those in bondage to it.

It would thus be inappropriate to ordain a murderer, but it was highly *appropriate* that a Scottish Church ordained an *ex-murderer* whose life could witness to the forgiveness, saving and transforming power of the Gospel.

Any barring of practising homosexuals from Ordination is not due to 'targeting' but because the Church ratifies God's calling of those who are to be her most *appropriate* leaders.

**7) I question that what is often 'usual' in British Christianity is 'normal'?**

If silver and gold measure-up to the 'norm' they get hallmarked and their worth is guaranteed. 'Normal' is not necessarily 'usual' since it means measuring up to the high standards of the 'norm'.

There are 'norms' for the Church and the Christian Life. Assessing them is futile unless set against God's basic 'norms' given us in Scripture. It has been said that the Church is the 'last section of society to believe in the supernatural'! David Edwards bemoaned the 'uncanny ability of so much contemporary church life to avoid mentioning matters such as God.'!

[Page 32 of my *But Deliver Us From Evil*, DLT 1974.]

How abnormal can a Church get? Against the Scriptural norm much of usual British Christianity is *ab-normal*!

**8) I question the assumption that in our 'Christian society' the complete pagan-to-Christian 'switch' and transformation basic to the New Testament is unnecessary, unlikely, impossible or optional.**

This misunderstanding only arises because of the abnormality of much British Christianity, see (7) above. Where the Church is most *normal* such transformations lie at the heart of her life and witness.

## SO WHAT?

If most or all of the eight convictions are INVALID, then a refusal to ordain homosexuals is not due either to discrimination or persecution, nor to lack of understanding. If the convictions are invalid, then practising homosexuals are not in any way ‘targeted’, **for everyone whose life appears primarily to reflect the human sickness, and not God’s remedy, would be deemed unsuitable to be set aside as a leader of the Body of Christ.**

This squares both with the New Testament and with a deep instinctive demand among many in society, that leaders should not be just one-of-us, but exhibit higher standards and morals.

My cartoon on the right makes the point about leadership.

It’s caption is :  
*‘YES, I KNOW ... BUT I CAN  
THOROUGHLY  
RECOMMEND IT!’*



Like much humour it is based on incongruity: that of the man’s own state and his claims. Incongruity undermines credibility. It is a good basis for humour but a bad one for leadership!

## GOING BACK TO GO FORWARD?

The Church would be less prone to give an impression of a democratic society if the New Testament teaching about ‘putting away’ were given its rightful place. Indeed it seems to be the ‘hinge’ of spiritual life and health.

## PUTTING AWAY

There is a widespread ignorance and disregard of the New Testament command actively to ***‘put away the works of darkness’*** (Romans 13:12). (***Put away*** is also well-translated as ***throw off, put aside, give up, strip ourselves of*** and ***fling away.***)

To feel one has the right to cling to the ‘works of darkness’ and embrace the gospel is an odd quirk of our nominally Christian society, and alien to the New Testament which commands us to ***put aside all secret and shameful deeds*** (2 Corinthians 4:2) ***put off all these : anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language .. put off the old self and the habits that went with it*** (Colossians 3:8-9); ***cast off the former nature & be renewed*** (Ephesians 4:22-23), ***putting away lying, sin, stealing, foul language, bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil-speaking, malice, sexual vice, uncleanness, covetousness.*** (based on Ephesians 4:25ff); ***Steer clear of the activities of darkness*** (Ephesians 5:4, 11).

This vital strand of teaching is not a negative action but a positive one. Our willingness to be emptied of evil is commanded so that we may enjoy being filled with the good!

The gifts, graces and empowering of the Holy Spirit of Jesus are ours for the asking and actively to retain, once we have permanently ‘renounced evil’ and ‘turned to Christ’.

The widespread failure of the Church to take its nominal members back through the basics of the Gospel means that the Church appears to many inside, and most outside of it, to be no different from society.

If blame has to be allocated for the present situation regarding the demand for the ordination of homosexuals, it seems to me to be less the ‘fault’ of the gay lobby than of the Church. Her too-ready willingness to conform to society has lead many to assume that she is merely a religious department of our social democracy – and to react accordingly.

In rejecting their response we act not out of superiority but out of failure. We can have no pride as we refuse them – only penitence.

I will give St. Paul the last word :

***Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing and perfect.*** (Romans 12:2)

This must be the basis of our response.

## APPENDIX A

Biblical References for the 'Before/After' pairs in Part III (page 5).

2 Peter 1:4	Romans 6:16
Romans 8:15	Romans 8:6
Titus 2:14	Psalm 51:5,7
Colossians 1:21-22	Romans 6:23
John 8:12 & 1 John 1:6-7	1 John 5:12
Acts 26:18	John 5:24 & 1 John 3:14
John 3:3ff	Ephesians 2:14
Galatians 4:3-6	2 Corinthians 5:17
Ephesians 2:16-18	Galatians 2:20
Romans 5:19	Romans 5:10
Ephesians 2:16-18	1 Corinthians 2:14-15