

THE BIBLE

**AND
HOMOSEXUALITY**

Contents

Foreword	iv
What does the Bible say about Homosexuality?	1
How do we read the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit?	2
Rules of interpretation	2
Some cautions when reading the Bible	3
The core message of the Bible	5
The role of the Holy Spirit	6
The Bible verses	6
What do the eight passages in Scripture say?	7
The Creation narrative of Genesis 1-3	7
The narrative of Sodom in Genesis 19	9
The holiness code of Leviticus	10
Paul and the New Testament	11
Conclusion	14



Inclusive & Affirming Ministries

By the Grace of God I am what I am

2nd Printing 2011

Published and distributed by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries
6 Silwerkruin, Van Breda Street, Durbanville Cape Town 7550
www.iam.org.za

All Rights Reserved

Copyright © 2008 Inclusive & Affirming Ministries

Foreword

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

All churches today are finding themselves grappling with questions and challenges around issues of human sexuality. These are matters which will not go away, and we must respond to them prayerfully and with loving hearts.

There are devout members in all congregations who are gay and lesbian in their orientation, and who belong to the Body of Christ and want to be supported and affirmed in their committed and faithful relationships. This poses a genuine challenge to traditional understandings and assumptions about the true meaning and message of the Scriptures. We are all being required to return afresh to the question: how does God intend us to approach and interpret the Bible in order to discern his will in this matter?

We do not have all the answers to all the questions surrounding right or wrong expressions of God's gift of our sexuality. While there is a considerable literature on the issue of homosexuality and the Bible, there is nevertheless a lack of material which expresses the biblical exegesis and hermeneutics of gay Christians themselves in an easily accessible and readable way. This booklet fills this gap admirably and offers an opportunity for the rest of the Body of Christ to hear fellow brothers and sisters' journey with the Bible and their witness to what the Holy Spirit is saying.

I trust that you will read this booklet with a mind and heart open to the Holy Spirit, in the knowledge that the issues around sexual orientation and biblical interpretation are not merely academic, but touch us all in a deeply personal way. It is a time for healing. Too many of our people have been hurt and traumatised – treated as outcasts – because of the way the Bible has been interpreted – misinterpreted!

Negative and rejecting attitudes towards gays and lesbians can have no place in our congregations, let alone in the community. Such prejudice is akin to racism, and we need to struggle against this with the same dedication and fervour with which we fought against the injustices of apartheid. In this way we will witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and be a means of healing and reconciliation.

I commend this booklet for your prayerful and thoughtful reflection.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

What does the Bible say about Homosexuality?

There are eight passages in the Bible that refer directly, or indirectly, to homosexuality. They are:

- The Creation story as narrated in Genesis 1–3
- The Sodom narrative in Genesis 19: 1–26, and Judges 19
- Leviticus 18:22
- Leviticus 20:13
- Romans 1:26–27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9–10
- 1 Timothy 1:10

According to some Christians, these passages of Scripture are crystal clear and they think the Bible literally condemns homosexuality itself as a sin.

However, this kind of literal reading of the Bible is problematic. If you read these passages literally, then how do you deal with those Bible verses that nobody reads literally any longer? For example:

- Deut 22:22: The punishment for adultery was to stone both the man and woman to death.
- Lev 18:19, 29: Having intercourse with a woman who was menstruating, could lead to excommunication.
- Deut 22:5: Women were explicitly forbidden to wear men's clothing.
- Deut 22:11: To wear clothing of two different kinds or fabric was totally forbidden.
- Deut 23:19: It was wrong to lend money at interest to a fellow Israelite. Many banks would be out of business if we took this literally today.
- 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12: Forbid women to speak in the congregation. Today, in contrast, most denominations have accepted women in the ministry.

It is very clear from these verses that one cannot read the Bible literally. The Bible cannot be opened randomly like a recipe book and read verse by verse as if these isolated verses represent God's will. We must interpret and understand the Bible, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, within the Biblical context, as well as the context of a modern society. The big challenge therefore is:

LIKE A RECIPE BOOK

How do we read the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit?

It is the Holy Spirit that helps us to experience, believe and confess the Bible to be the *inspired Word of God*. But what does this expression mean? Some people understand this literally and for them the Bible is '*God's Word*' because God personally dictated every letter and word.

Others believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the *authors* of the Bible to *write* about God's great deeds in their OWN language, culture, idiom and experiences. Therefore we can only understand the Bible, not literally, but within their, and our, context.

HOW the Bible is inspired by God (Inspiration theory), has always been one of the biggest points of contention in the effort to discover what the Bible is saying about homosexuality.

For a responsible interpretation of the Bible, it is first of all necessary to respect the Bible as the inspired Word of God. A very important aspect of this respect is not to force your *own* preferences or prejudices into your reading of God's Word, but to take the Bible's intended nature and purpose very seriously.

"...the wonderful mystery is that God speaks to us, not in a mysterious oracle-like¹ manner, but through a book that was written by people in human language and with the intention that it should be understood by humans according to the normal rules of understanding human language."

(Prof. W. D. Jonker)

According to Jonker, this respect for the authentic nature of the Bible demands that we take great care in making the effort to understand the *true meaning* when we try to interpret and understand Biblical texts or words.

This can only happen if we remember and apply certain important rules of interpretation.

Rules of interpretation

Firstly, a responsible interpretation of the Bible demands that we do everything possible to understand the *original intention* of the author and the meaning of the words that he used. In order to do this, we need to understand the *cultural context* of the times in which the various authors

1 "Oracle" Refers to how the Greek God, ZEUS, spoke. He used the actual vocal cords of the prophetess – speaking directly through her voice.

lived. In this way we will come to understand the unique circumstances in which they lived and wrote, the different literary styles that they used and the people to whom they addressed their writings.

Secondly, we need to determine and evaluate the meaning and place of specific verses within the context of the broader meaning of Scripture. This is the context of the text. In other words; where and how does the specific verse fit into a bigger passage or chapter, and more specifically, into the overall message of the Bible? One of the most important questions in this regard is: "What is the function and place in the Bible of the so-called legal chapters (Deuteronomy and Leviticus)?" It is generally accepted that throughout history shifts in culture occurred that caused the validity of certain prescriptions to disappear for later generations. One example of this is how the teachings of Christ often resulted in a deepening of perspective as well as a change of understanding in obedience to many Old Testament prescriptions. One should take this into account when discerning the meaning of the verses that deal with homosexuality.

Thirdly, the verses should also be read within the context of today (the contemporary context of the reader). This principle asks of the interpreter that the Word be understandable, credible, actual, prophetic and bear witness to the situation at hand. To achieve this the reader should know and understand his or her own context and the questions that are of importance to the situation. With regards to homosexuality it implies knowledge of recent scientific research; the ongoing debate within the church and society; the various viewpoints and the courage to discern what is right in the light of the teachings of the Gospel.

Some cautions when reading the Bible

More than ever, Christians need to be humble and acknowledge the many potholes they can stumble into when interpreting the Bible to find answers for the pressing issues of our times. This is especially with regard to the issue of homosexuality. There is a growing consensus that there are explicit dangers in reading the Bible which need to be avoided.

One of the dangers normally associated with traditionalism or fundamentalism is to isolate specific verses from their broader meaning or context, to read them literally (as discrete words) and then to regard them as eternal and unchanging norms for your own life. A good example of this danger is the way in which women were forced for centuries to wear hats in church (1 Cor 11:5). The same has been happening with the verses that refer to homosexual deeds (see Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26-27 and 1 Cor 6:9). The churches have been interpreting these verses literally then taking them as

EXPLICIT DANGERS

eternal absolute norms for all time. Today most Biblical scholars agree that these verses were primarily aimed against sexual perversions like temple prostitution and pederasty that were practiced by the neighbouring heathen cultures. As such, many heterosexual men were guilty of these "homosexual perverted deeds".

1. A second danger that is common in fundamentalism or literal interpretation is the inconsistent application of the literal method. This happens when the reader regards certain verses as eternal, authoritative truths while totally ignoring verses similar in context, style etc. For example some Christians read Leviticus 18:22 literally: "You may not lay with another man as with a woman, it is an abomination", and use it as an argument against all gay people. While on the other hand verses like the law against the wearing of men's clothes by women (Deut 22:5), or the wearing of clothes made of two different fabrics (Deut 22:11), or the lending of money against interest to a fellow Israelite (Deut 23:19) are completely ignored. Such a use of Scripture is totally wrong and reflects a double standard and underlines the importance of understanding the context for a meaningful understanding of specific verses.
2. A third danger that relates to the first, is to use the texts as proof of your own point of view. The meaning of Bible verses is not only determined by the author but also by the reader. Nobody approaches the Bible as an "empty sheet that has not been written on". Our likes or dislikes and positive or negative prejudices all play a role. If we want to apply the texts about homosexuality today, we must honestly ask ourselves:
 - Do I have enough knowledge about homosexuality and what it means to be gay?
 - What prejudices do I carry with me into the Bible?
 - Where and how did I acquire my knowledge about homosexuality; from stereotypes, via the media or from first-hand knowledge?
 - Do I know enough to make an informed and respectful opinion?
3. A Fourth danger is the temptation of modern translators of the Bible to let their lack of knowledge, prejudice, and misconceptions play a role in new translations of the original Biblical text. At the most basic level, it is important to note that the words gay person and homosexuality did not exist in the original languages of the Bible. The term "homosexuality" originated only late in the nineteenth century. The Old Testament word "qadesh", which is translated in the modern Bible as homosexual, had very little in common with the modern understanding of what being gay or

homosexual is all about. It is generally accepted that it referred to certain homosexual behaviour, associated with the idolatry of heathen temple prostitution as it was practised in Biblical times. All these facts should remind the respectful reader that even the seemingly harmless process of Bible translation, is not exempt from human error or prejudice or lack of knowledge.

4. The fifth and last danger is that of *moralism and prescriptiveness*, where the reader regresses back to legalism and falls back under the yoke of the law, thereby forgetting the "Greatest law of all – LOVE" and thus rejecting the grace and mercy of God.

The core message of the Bible

The fact that the Bible did not fall from the sky, but that it is a historical book, written by people in human language, does not affect the fact that it is a reliable source for our faith. I do not have to believe the history of Israel or any other history in the Bible to believe and be saved. Many of the historical facts (some with mistakes) were also told by other non-Biblical authors (Romans). Although I may know these "proofs", it does not redeem me.

However, the fact that God became human and lived amongst us, that Jesus is the Saviour of the World and also of me – that I must and can believe, and in order to believe that, the Holy Spirit must touch and convince me. The belief that the Bible is God's Word relates solely to the content of the core message of the Bible. We could call it the golden thread that runs through the whole Bible. Not every verse carries the same weight for the church. The Bible is read as the Word of God in community with all believers and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, from the viewpoint of the core message.

For Christians that core message has always been: The saving grace of God as it is embodied in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. From this perspective the church interprets and applies the Bible.

When we read the Bible or try to understand a sermon or the communion, we are being placed in the presence of God through these stories in the Bible. Through the Holy Spirit we are enlightened so that we come to the confession: "My Lord and my God!" And only when the Holy Spirit has brought me to this confession can I truly say that the Bible is the Word of God.

The role of the Holy Spirit

I can therefore not prove to anyone that the Bible is true and then expect

GREATEST LAW OF ALL - LOVE

him or her to believe. Only once the core message of the Bible has struck you through the work of the Holy Spirit so that you can confess, "Jesus is truly the Lord", then you acknowledge and understand the authority of Scripture. The authority of the Bible therefore only functions "in relationship between God, a human being and Scripture".

We are reminded of the words of John Calvin: "The Bible will remain dead words, unless the Spirit of God enlightens the reader. Word of God is only applicable when the Spirit of God works with the reader of the Bible."

The true nature of the authority of Scripture is something that must be experienced. And faithful people who seek and listen while they read can experience it.

After everything that you have now said, it seems like I cannot claim: "But it is written in the Bible"?

Indeed – one can never use the Bible like that and quote verses out of context, especially not as "ammunition" against your neighbour.

All these dangers remind us of the importance of interpreting the Bible responsibly in our discernment of the will of God regarding homosexuality. What is expected of us is to respect the authentic nature of the Bible and always to keep in mind the golden thread of this unique Book – the salvation through Jesus Christ. This golden thread is the central theme that directs all God's actions and commands that are told to us in the Old Testament. This theme is the revelation of God's merciful love in Jesus Christ and the tremendous implications that this holds for the world and our lives. Individual verses and instructions, including those that refer to homosexuality can only be understood from the context of this central theme.

The Bible verses

Most modern theologians agree that there are eight passages in Scripture that refer directly or indirectly to homosexual practices but that these do not refer to homosexuality as it is defined today.

So what is the difference between: "homosexuality as we know it today" and "homosexual practices"?

As mentioned before, the term "homosexual" only originated in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The term "gay-orientation" is even more recent. Homosexuality as an orientation determines the essence of someone's emotional, psychological, romantic and physical nature. When the Bible refers to homosexuality it normally describes sexual practices and especially lust between people of the same gender. On the one hand, gay-orientation

is much more than just sexual practices, while on the other hand people with heterosexual orientation, driven by pure lust or other passions, can also engage in homosexual practices.

The Bible also condemns certain heterosexual practices (rape, adultery, etc.) without condemning heterosexuality as such. This condemnation does not mean that we can interpret those verses as "the Biblical viewpoint about heterosexuality."

The same applies to the verses about homosexual practices. We cannot refer to these eight passages in Scripture as "the Biblical viewpoint about homosexuality." The eight passages are not a worked-out homosexual "theory" or "viewpoint" and according to most scholars these verses have absolute nothing in common with the experience and nature of a gay Christian.

What do the eight passages in Scripture say?

The Creation narrative of Genesis 1-3

Although they have no explicit reference to homosexuality, most scholars agree that the creation stories in Genesis 1–3 (specifically Gen 1:26–27 and 2:24) are very important for discussions about homosexuality. The so-called creation order or the natural order of things as God created it, as told in Genesis, has for a long time been one of the important pillars for ethical discernment in the Christian church.

It is on the basis of this order that many people see homosexuality as totally unacceptable because it is – according to them – "unnatural". It is against the "natural" order that God created. We therefore need to discuss some of the questions around this issue.

It is generally accepted in modern theology that there are TWO creation stories in Genesis 1–3. The first (Gen 1:1–2:4) is primarily theological-pastoral in nature. It is addressed to the Jewish exiles of the 6th century B.C. and is intended to comfort the people in a situation of great disruption and despair. The second story (Gen 2:5–3:24) deals with the crises of humanity and God's gracious redemption of the fall. The general context of both stories refers to communities of people – in this case Israel – who are at a very low point in their history. Because of this they are seeking security and order. They are also struggling to survive in a fragile and hostile world.

Within this context, the author praises the greatness of God's good and orderly work of creation; God's trustworthy compassion for the people God created. Contrary to the gods of Babylon, it is clear that the God of Israel is still the Creator

and in control of everything and that the human race has a place, calling and destiny within this created order. As a Creation of God, the human being is not only the climax of creation (Gen 1:26 and further) – but also the centre of everything created (Gen 2:15 and further). The human being is created in the Image of God, and as such is the representative of God to reign over everything (Gen 1:26). The human being is also called to be productive, procreate, to inhabit and cultivate the earth (Gen 1:27-28 and 2:24–25). According to Choon-Leong Seow, Gen 1:28 spells out the deepest intention of Genesis 1: “The intent of the author of Genesis 1 is to affirm the growth of human population ... theologically one recognizes that the point is the goodness of procreation.”

For many years Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2:21–24 played a very important role in the debate about homosexuality. Although homosexuality is not directly mentioned or condemned in these passages, the argument has been that the norm laid down here for sexual relations is that of heterosexuality. Only within such a relationship can we keep to the God-given command to be fruitful and fill the earth; to procreate. The logical deduction from this argument is that gay relationships have no possibility for natural procreation and are therefore clearly not part of the Divine plan for humanity. One theologian states: “God created Adam and Eve to be heterosexual, expecting them to be fertile and to populate the world with humans ... that is God’s plan: for people of opposite genders to marry, raise children and have dominion over all the earth.”

At first glance this argument sounds irrefutable, especially in the light of the biological compatibility of male and female – they are equipped by nature to fulfil their procreative function within a sexual relationship. The importance of a happy monogamous marriage and healthy family life can also hardly be disputed. But it remains a question whether human sexuality has been adequately explained by this – that is by the natural differences between the sexes and the purpose to procreate. A more important question though; is whether this the only morally acceptable expression of human sexuality? Many scholars doubt this in view of the broader picture presented in Genesis 1–3.

In Genesis 2, a different picture emerges of human sexuality. One that is closer to modern society’s experience of sexuality. In this passage we find a greater emphasis on friendship and companionship characterised by equality and mutuality. Here procreation is not all-important and neither is the difference between the sexes that important. “The two can cleave to one another because they are human, not because they are a heterosexual couple.”

In many relationships loyalty and friendship between the sexes is more important than procreation. There are many heterosexual couples who are childless and no one calls their relationship “unnatural”. Many people are sterile

and unable to produce children, while others remain single. From this we can conclude that the procreation model of Genesis 1–3, in which male and female are the primary role players, can hardly claim to be the final definition of what constitutes “natural” human sexuality.

The narrative of Sodom in Genesis 19

What exactly was the sin of Sodom? Although theologians in the previous two centuries named homosexuality as the sin of Sodom, the majority of today's Biblical scholars agree that this story does not speak of homosexual deeds by gay people, but of deviant sexual behaviour.

In Genesis 18, God sends two angels to Sodom and Gomorrah to announce God's judgement over the people. Lot, the cousin of Abraham, persuades the angels to stay the night with him and his family in his home in Sodom. In Genesis 19 we are told how “all the people from the whole town” circled Lot's house and demanded that he deliver the angels to them so that they may have intercourse (sexual) with them. This is a perfect example of an attempt at gang rape. Disturbed by this defiling of the ancient custom of hospitality, Lot tried to protect his guests by offering his two daughters to the crowd – a deed which is totally immoral by our standards. The men of Sodom decline his offer and the angels strike the men with blindness. The angels rescue Lot and his family, while the two cities are destroyed.

A few important comments. Firstly, the judgment over the two cities because of their sin was announced before the so-called homosexual incident occurred. Secondly, all the people (men) of Sodom participated in the attack on Lot's house. In any given culture at a given time, not more than a small percentage (4-8%) are gay. Thirdly, it is a fact that Lot also offered his daughters, which means that the men also had heterosexual interests. Fourthly, if the great sin of Sodom was sexual, why does God save Lot directly afterwards, when he committed incest with his daughters? And lastly – and probably the most importantly – why is the issue of homosexuality never mentioned again in all the other Biblical references to Sodom? In Ezekiel 16:48–50 it is clearly stated that the people of Sodom – like so many people today – were materially rich but did not have any compassion for the poor. Furthermore, they worshipped idols. When the New Testament refers to the sin of Sodom it talks of their lack of hospitality.

The holiness code of Leviticus

The meaning of the purity laws in Leviticus can only fully be understood against the historical and cultural background of the Israelites of Biblical times. Israel occupied a unique position as the chosen people of God. They therefore had to distinguish themselves from the heathens by not submitting to their customs and idolatry.

Leviticus 18 to 20 is a call to the people to “Be Holy”. This meant: do not live according to heathen customs like temple prostitution for instance. The intention of the Old Testament rituals and laws were to protect the specific and distinguishing character of the Jewish faith and culture against an evil and heathen world. But how evil was the world of Biblical times?

From recorded stories found during excavations, we have some knowledge about the customs of Israel’s neighbouring countries. We must take this knowledge seriously if we want to answer the questions: “Who were they, what was their situation and what did this law mean to them?”

The Babylonians and the Assyrians knew homosexual practices, especially in their temples. Homosexual priests, often dressed in female clothing, did erotic dances and sang while they offered and performed their services to men and women. Homosexual prostitution had an acknowledged place in the temples.

The people of Canaan, the closest neighbours of Israel, also had their temples where young men were engaged in homosexual temple prostitution (see Deut 23: 17–18). During religious rituals men also dressed as women. In the literature of Canaan, eroticism plays a remarkably big role, compared to Israel.

Sexuality was therefore one of the more specific characteristics of the culture of Canaan. In Genesis 19 we can read to what excesses this could lead. Not a few, but ALL the men of the Canaan city of Sodom wanted to rape the guests of Lot (Gen 19:4). It is clear that this passage concerns mostly heterosexual men (amongst which there would of course be a small percentages of gays) and one gets the feeling that this was not the first time something like this had happened. The men of Canaan were on the lookout to see when new guests arrived.

We must read the holiness code of Leviticus 18 and 20 against this background. In these chapters of the holiness code it is specifically forbidden for the Israelites to surrender or yield to the sexual practices of the people of Canaan (Lev 18:3, 21, 24–30; see also Lev 20:1–5, 23–24). The sexual excesses of Canaan had a strong power of attraction on the Israelites (see Num 25).

The primary meaning of Leviticus 18 and 20 is the rejection of heathen sexual

practices. One must also read the prohibition on the wearing of female clothing by men (Deut 22:5) as a warning not to follow the customs and religious practices of Canaan. In Israel such sexual behaviour is typically associated with idolatry. Israel had to be different from the heathen nations!

Israel had to be "different", "holy", because God is different and holy. The God of Israel is unlike the gods and goddesses of Canaan, who were worshipped through various kinds of eroticism. There is no other God and therefore, given the image Israel had of their God, there was no room for eroticism in this context.

Some groups within Israel that were attracted to the religious ideas and customs of Canaan did not like this unique aspect of their God. From the Bible and from knowledge acquired from excavations, we know that some Israelites tried to worship a goddess from Canaan. The Israelites had to be warned against this.

Paul and the New Testament

The four gospels and most of the books of the New Testament mention nothing about homosexuality. Paul is the only author who refers to this issue (Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 1Tim 1:10).

For the Biblical discussion about homosexuality Romans 1:26–28 is of the utmost importance. Homosexual activity is not only condemned, but for the first time, similar deeds amongst women are mentioned.

The broader context of Romans 1:18 to 3:20 is to explain why the gospel of grace is so important. To motivate this, Paul starts by painting a picture of the extent of the depravity of humanity. He is pointing out that everybody needs the saving grace of God because this depravity occurs amongst the heathen as well as the Jews;

"The entire opening section of Romans is intended to lead to the conclusion that 'there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23-24), all persons are in need of God's gracious and unearned justification."

The core message of Romans and Corinthians is: "...that we must live in the new freedom that we received in Christ." The Christian must live through the Spirit. Just in case this idea is not clear enough for the church, Paul gives them the so-called "vice-list" (a common practice of educators of those times). He contrasts these vices with what a Spirit-filled life looks like.

Paul addresses the issue of homosexual behaviour specifically within his description of the depravity of heathens. It is (for him) an aspect of idolatry,

where the worship of the only true God has been replaced with the worship of unworthy and corrupt images (Rom 1:23,25). According to Paul, homosexuality is one of a series of signs of human rebellion against God and God's wrath over humanity. (The "wrath" consists of the fact that God gave them over to the desires of their hearts for impurity (Rom 1:24,26).) The sin of homosexuality, according to Paul, is that unnatural relationships are replacing those that God intended. According to some Biblical scholars Paul's arguments relate directly to the ancient opinion of the relation between idolatry and immorality.

This is a negative judgment of homosexuality. Romans 1:26–27 represents most probably the clearest argument against homosexuality in the whole Bible. However, the negative reference to homosexuality is not unambiguous. The question today, is whether it still carries the same theological meaning and weight as it did in Paul's time. It is clear from the context that the people referred to were consciously rebelling against God and rejected all moral law. These weren't people who led lives devoted to God, and they also weren't confused about their sexual orientation.

The cultural and historical situation in which Paul wrote indicates clearly (as in Leviticus) that his judgment was directed against a certain form of homosexual behaviour and specifically, that which was associated with heathen idolatry. Although some Biblical scholars relate Paul's reference to the "unnatural" nature of homosexual behaviour (v. 6–7) to the "order of creation", and as such as a deviation of this order, other scholars regard this as nothing more than an extreme form of moral bewilderment that is the direct result of idolatry. It is in connection with this that they believe that Paul voices his disgust here against the practice of pederasty (sex with boys).

Paul was in Corinth when he wrote to the Romans, and in those days Corinth was an international centre for trading. Like so many modern harbour cities, Corinth was known as a nest of immorality where sex was abused and for sale in unthinkable ways. Various heathen gods were worshipped, amongst them Aphrodite, the goddess of love. According to research, more than 1000 young people, male and female, worked as prostitutes in Corinth.

Pederasty flourished in many other Greek cities. Older men "took care" of younger men of 12 to 16 years old. The younger man was his "protégé" and it was the task of the older man to school the younger to become the ideal Greek citizen. This relationship usually included sexual contact. This relationship was acceptable while a young man was in military service and being groomed for manhood. Once he reached a certain age, the young adult was then expected to marry and raise a family. In the literary and visual arts these relationships were frequently depicted. The older man was usually

a prominent and important political figure. In these relationships there was no caring equality or mutuality.

This is what Corinth looked like when Paul was living and writing his letters there. It is against this background that he voiced his concerns about these forms of moral decay. Against this background we must also read his warnings against homosexuality as he experienced it. Paul, therefore, had sexual exploitation - where one person has power over the other - in mind when he wrote his letters. He must have seen this as something that undoubtedly was connected to the idolatrous culture of the Greeks. As a law-abiding Jew he reacted to this phenomenon as something that defiled the holiness code of Leviticus and was therefore something that made the person "unclean" or "impure".

This passage still helps us today to recognise how a life without God can lead to moral decay and sexual perversions. The question is whether this kind of decay includes all kinds of homosexual behaviour? A loving, committed and faithful Christian gay couple who express their love in an intimate physical manner surely does not display rejection or rebellion against God?

As Blount wrote:

"The connection between homosexuality and idolatry, taken for granted in Paul's religious and secular environment, is not assumed in modern society... If we no longer perceive that homosexuality is the result of idolatry, however, we may consider the possibility that a person may be at once homosexual and in Christ."

"Idolatry", "temple prostitution", "to be driven by your physical desires and lust" – these are words and concepts that play a vital role in these passages. Furthermore, these verses are concerned with physical homosexual deeds.

Whoever wants to read into the life of a gay Christian the above meaning of homosexuality is doing him or her a great injustice. Science tells us that gay people – just like heterosexual people – have a great desire, not so much for sexual gratification, but for companionship, a loving relationship, closeness and the physical tenderness and intimacy that accompanies that.

It is very important to understand the focus and core of Paul's arguments. Idolatry inevitably leads to spiritual and moral decay. In contrast, the person who follows Christ will not subject his or her body to these acts of idolatry. Gay Christians who live in loving and faithful relationships can only agree or endorse everything that Paul said.

To bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit, namely love, trust, self-discipline, friendliness and all those qualities that are associated with being a disciple of Christ, is as important for the gay Christian as it is for the heterosexual

Christian. One should therefore not find it strange that most devout gay Christians find the criticism against idolatrous lustful behaviour and “giving up natural for unnatural deeds” as totally irrelevant to their lives and understanding of their sexuality.

Conclusion

The discussion makes the following points clear:

- It is irresponsible and unscientific to interpret the Bible literally or in a fundamentalist way. It can lead to the selective use, and abuse of scripture.
- To fully understand the Bible it takes effort, time, study and being humble before God.
- In the historical and cultural context of the Bible, the kind of homosexual practice being condemned referred to perverted acts associated with idolatry. The same would apply to any heterosexual perversion.
- The Bible does not condemn a committed, loving and faithful homosexual relationship as we know it today. In fact the Bible says absolutely nothing about such a relationship.