

- Premier.org.uk
- [Radio](#)
- [Premier.tv](#)
- [Magazines](#)
-



January 15, 2013

1. [Christianity](#)
2. Greg Downes Extended

Christianity Magazine

- [Subscribe](#)
- [Free Sample](#)

Browse By Category

- [Features](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Podcast](#)
- [Forgery in the Bible](#)
- [Dear Maggie](#)
- [Culture](#)

Browse By Issue

- [February 2013](#)
- [January 2013](#)
- [December 2012](#)
- [Archive](#)

Useful Links

- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Writing for Christianity](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Privacy & Cookie Policy](#)
- [Contact Us](#)



:

The Bible and Homosexuality: Part Two (Extended version)

The Bible and homosexuality: part 2

Theologian in residence Greg Downes unpacks the traditional evangelical understanding of homosexuality

The issue of homosexuality and the Church is rarely out of the news.

It seems that ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ will now not keep quiet. The government’s plans to redefine marriage have dominated the news recently. However, this article is about the Bible and homosexual practice – surely the starting point before we get into any debate about ‘gay marriage’.

As I looked at today’s news, one feature was about a vicar in New Zealand who has caused offence by putting up a poster outside his church in Auckland that claims Jesus was gay.

‘It’s Christmas. Time for Jesus to come out’, the sign proclaims, with an image of baby Jesus as a toddler in a manger, surrounded by a halo coloured in the gay rainbow motif.

I remember clearly the one and only time that I met Sir Ian McKellen. It was at a set of traffic lights in Trafalgar Square. I happened to be passing by as a protest rally was ending. As we waited for the light to turn green, he turned to me and said, ‘Today will be the day when justice will be done.’ Not quite knowing what he was on about, I nodded in agreement, thinking that whatever it was sounded good. As I walked away, I realised that the rally had been a protest in favour of gay rights and later, that Wednesday 23rd February 1994 was the day the government lowered the age of consent for homosexual acts from 21 to 18.

Justice: that is what the issue of homosexuality has become for many people in our secular society. To many, to suggest homosexuality might not be the moral equivalent to heterosexuality is tantamount to racism.

These assumptions have permeated the Church, too, and there are even those from the evangelical

tradition calling for a reappraisal of the traditional Christian understanding of homosexuality.

A Common Argument

A common argument we hear today is: 'The Bible approves of slavery and the subjugation of women and the Church has moved on from these issues; surely it is consistent and logical to now champion gay rights?'

**There's no better time to subscribe to CHRISTIANITY
25% cheaper than the cover price plus a choice of free gift!**

While the Bible does not repudiate slavery directly, as the book of Philemon reveals, the biblical view of humanity inevitably leads Christians to abolish slavery and find other ways to deal with debtors and prisoners of war (Philemon 1:15-16).

Likewise the Bible's view of women, emerging from the misogyny of the prevailing cultural norms, culminates in the radical equality we see in the New Testament (Galatians 3:28).

With homosexual practice, we see no such development, nor does the Bible allow for the possibility of one. The Bible is uniformly negative about it. What's more, unlike the issues of slavery and gender, it does not relate to a person's God-given worth but is a prohibition against a lifestyle that is chosen (even though same-sex attraction is clearly not).

In October's edition of *Evangelicals Now*, the rector of St Ebbe's Church, Oxford, Vaughan Roberts, gave an interview entitled 'A Battle I Face' in which he spoke about his own struggle with unwanted same-sex attraction and his decision to be celibate. He was asked whether giving pastoral counsel to those who themselves struggled with same-sex attraction had affected his decision to be more open. 'Certainly,' he said. 'I pray for them every Monday from a list that is divided in two: Those who continue to seek to be faithful to the Bible's teaching that the only right context for sexual intercourse is in a marriage between a man and a woman and those who have moved away from that view. Sadly, the second group is growing.'

It is no surprise that the numbers are growing as we live in times where there is a theological paradigm shift happening in the Church on the issue. It is more than a coincidence that this theological shift is mirroring a massive cultural shift in society at large, where in the space of one generation attitudes to homosexuality have gone from prohibition to tolerance, and now to celebration.

What's more, the relativist society in which we live ensures that there is an absolutism in this new sexual ethic, one in which there is very little tolerance for any dissenting voices. So how do we know what is true when there are conflicting voices from people who command our respect within the evangelical constituency?

The American Methodist scholar Albert C Outler examined John Wesley's work and recognised that while Wesley (1703-1791) believed in the primacy of scripture, he also used tradition, reason and experience in discerning truth.

While looking primarily at scripture, we will utilise the 'Wesleyan quadrilateral' to wrestle with this thorny issue.

Scripture

Many of the voices calling for a reappraisal of the Church's historic teaching are *revisionists*. Revisionism is distinct from liberalism in that old-fashioned liberalism (in essence) argued 'the Bible says this – the Bible is wrong'.

Revisionism (in essence) argues 'properly understood– the Bible says this'.

I remember talking with a theology student who told me confidently, 'Nowhere in the Bible does it say that homosexual practice is wrong.' This is the bold assertion of a revisionist. But is this new hermeneutic (interpretation) warranted?

There are 12 references to homosexuality in the Bible (nine in the OT, three in the NT).

Five of the OT references refer to homosexuality in the context of cult prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:23-24, 15:12-15, 22:46; 2 Kings 23:6-8).

We will consider the remaining seven thematically in three distinct groups:

1. The Lifestyle of Unbelievers Outside of the Law

(Genesis 19:5; Judges 19:22)

Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:5) has an obvious parallel with the story of Gibeah (Judges 19:22) so we will consider them together.

In 1955, Derrick Sherwin Bailey became the first theologian in modern times to re-evaluate the traditional orthodox view in his book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. He suggested that the sin of Sodom (and Gibeah) was in fact a breach of hospitality and not homosexuality. He argued that the demands of the men of Sodom regarding Abraham's guests – 'Bring them out so that we might know them' – was in fact not sexual but flouted the ancient rules of hospitality.

This is not good exegesis for a number of reasons; for one, Abraham's gratuitous offer of women instead indicates it was sexual. Also the Hebrew word for know (*yada*), used 943 times in the OT, can refer to sexual intercourse, and of the ten occasions it does, six of these are in the book of Genesis.

Perhaps the most convincing argument is the NT interpreting the OT, as Jude 7 teaches that 'Sodom and Gomorrah...gave themselves up to sexual immorality'.

There's no better time to subscribe to **CHRISTIANITY**
25% cheaper than the cover price plus a choice of free gift!

2. The Lifestyle of Believers Under the Law

(Leviticus 18:22; 20:13)

'Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable' (Leviticus 18:22) has been seen as a classic verse clearly prohibiting homosexual activity.

A new Bible translation, the *Queen James Bible* claiming to be the world's first gay Bible, has been published (in the words of the editors) 'to resolve interpretive ambiguity in the Bible...in a way that

makes homophobic interpretations impossible’

When it comes to the Leviticus texts, the *Queen James Bible* translates Leviticus 18:22 as ‘Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind in the temple of Molech: it is an abomination.’

The problem is, the translators have achieved this lucidity by changing the very text of scripture, by conflating the verse with the previous one (Leviticus 18:21) which is a condemnation of the practice of child sacrifice in the temple of Molech.

They were, in fact, part of the holiness code prescribing how God’s covenant people were to conduct themselves in distinction to the surrounding nations. This flagrant distortion and twisting of scripture in an attempt to make the text say what it patently does not will fail to convince anyone committed to the authority of the Bible.

Another way of circumventing these verses is to suggest that they no longer apply in the new covenant. I chatted to a well-known OT scholar once, who stated, ‘There will come a day when evangelical Christians have to repent of their attitude to homosexuality; it is no more sinful than wearing polycotton shirts.’

He was pointing out that the Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality are part of the same law code which condemns many things, such as the eating of pork and the wearing of garments that are woven with two kinds of material.

These Levitical rules no longer apply in the new covenant, it is argued.

The Reformation theologian John Calvin (1509-1564) rightly distinguished between the *ritual* and *moral* law, arguing that though the ritual law is fulfilled in Christ (and therefore abolished), the moral law still applies. If there is any doubt that this is the case, it is further evidenced by the fact that the prohibition against homosexuality resurfaces in the new covenant (NT), and is articulated in three new separate prohibitions. While the NT makes it clear that the ritual requirements of the law are now superseded in Christ (Acts 10:9-15), the moral law remains intact, and in fact is reiterated forcibly.

3. The Lifestyle of Believers in Christ and Under Grace

(1 Timothy 1:8-10; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Romans 1:26-27)

There are three Pauline prohibitions in which the apostle argues that homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian discipleship.

In 1 Timothy 1:8-10 ‘practising homosexuality’ is one example among many of the lifestyle of those who break the law of God.

The Greek word that is used is *arsenokoites*, which literally means ‘male in a bed’ and (as the linguistic connotation infers) refers to a person who engages in homosexual sex – particularly the active partner.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul includes those who practice the homosexual *lifestyle* among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Here there are *two* words for homosexuality used, the same one as in the Timothy passage, but also the word *malakoi* which literally means ‘soft to the touch’, and refers to the passive partner in homosexual sex.

There are some who argue that these verses clearly speak of pederasty (the practice of keeping a catamite

– a boy kept for sexual relations with a man), and therefore have nothing to say concerning the current debate as to whether consensual, monogamous gay relationships are an acceptable Christian option. The fact is, this is not clear – especially with reference to the Timothy passage, which uses a singular word to describe homosexual activity and is therefore unlikely to refer to this practice.

There's no better time to subscribe to **CHRISTIANITY**
25% cheaper than the cover price plus a choice of free gift!

What is clear from the graphic words used is that what is being prohibited here are actions – homosexual *behaviour* not *orientation*.

In Romans 1:25-27, Paul writes:

‘They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.’

The context is non-believers in general and the vocabulary used does not lend itself to referring to pederasty (as some have argued 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 does)

This also is the only passage which seems to expressly prohibit lesbianism. Surely, then, this is a blanket prohibition of homosexual practice of any kind for all God’s people? Not so fast, argue the revisionist exegetes.

Since the passage states women ‘exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones’ and men ‘abandoned natural relations with women’, does it refer to something else?

Some have interpreted this as a condemnation of *perversion* rather than *inversion*. Perversion is where a heterosexual chooses to experiment sexually with their own gender, but inversion is where a person has a homosexual orientation that he or she cannot help – that is innate to them. This interpretation is mistaken, as the Bible authors knew nothing of the modern distinction between homosexual orientation and practice.

The historian Michel Foucault argued that homosexuality as an identity did not emerge until 1870 – before that, the terminology referred to practices alone and not identity.

We have already noted that for Paul it is the *behaviour* that is prohibited, so any mention of men ‘abandoning natural relations’ cannot refer to heterosexuals going against their natural orientation – but rather that the practice of homosexuality contravenes natural law; it is not how the creator intended us to live.

The sobering fact is that out of all the Bible references to homosexuality, every one is negative regarding its practice.

The Big Picture

John Stott said that the most convincing argument, however, is not these sets of verses to be used in a proof text manner, but rather the single affirmation of heterosexual marriage to be found in Genesis 2:24 –

‘That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.’

It is sometimes said that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality (as if this cancels out all the other verses), but Jesus squarely condemned sexual immorality in general (Mark 7:20-23) and quotes the Genesis 2:24 verse in his teaching as an expression of his Father’s will in creation (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7)

Further to this, the whole sweep of scripture is, without exception or deviation, a heterosexual narrative from the creation of Adam and Eve, through the poetic affirmation of heterosexual love in the Song of Songs, right up to the finale of the book, when Revelation concludes using a heterosexual metaphor to speak of the return of Christ (Revelation 22:17).

Those who try to argue that the intimate relationship of David and Jonathan was homoerotic simply fail to understand the Jewish cultural context, and retroactively visit the assumptions of our own highly sexualised culture on the text, in an attempt to make the Bible say what it does not.

Those who say the Bible does not teach homosexual practice is wrong are simply engaging in hermeneutical gymnastics, in which they embrace a revisionist interpretation which is completely alien to the original meaning of the text.

Since the scriptures are crystal clear on the issue, my fear is that any shift to embrace this new interpretation is nothing short of a denial of the authority of the Bible itself.

Tradition

It is important to remember that we stand in a spiritual tradition that is 2,000 years old, and longer if we include our Jewish heritage. We stand on the shoulders of giants – men and women who have been theologians, pastors, prophets, apostles, mystics, teachers, evangelists and writers. When seeking to ascertain if something is true, we need to ask ourselves, ‘Is there an unbroken tradition which seems to argue in a particular way?’

Applying this to the issue of homosexuality, there is a near-unanimous tradition that the only two possible Christian vocations with regard to our sexuality are marriage and celibacy.

Added to this, there has been a remarkable ecclesial consensus on the issue.

The three great traditions of the global Church (Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism), though they diverge on many things, agree on this.

Surely we would need very compelling reasons to come up with a new hermeneutic that is at variance with this ecumenical consensus and also the ‘silent majority’ (as GK Chesterton would say) of so many brothers and sisters who have gone before.

Reason

One of the reasons Roman Catholics oppose a revision of the historic teaching of the Church is that they believe homosexual acts contravene natural law.

The great Western theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) expounded on natural law in his *Summa Theologica*. He wrote: ‘...all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, in so far as...its being imprinted

on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends.’

In other words, for Thomas, natural law was closely aligned to divine law; or, put another way, theology and biology belong together – we can get an inkling of the creator’s intension for a thing by assessing how it was created to function. This is the idea that freedom is rooted in design; a thing is most free when it is functioning as it was designed to function.

We can reason that homosexual practice is not the creator’s original design, since male and female are anatomically and biologically made to complement one another.

Experience

The 1998 Lambeth Conference for the Anglican Communion affirmed the Church’s historic teaching. It also stated, ‘We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons.’

It is important in the current debate that we engage lovingly with those with whom we disagree, and listen attentively – especially to those who are working out what it means to be a disciple of Christ and have same-sex attraction.

There are many voices in the current debate that speak about the pain and rejection gay people have experienced through the Church. There is no doubt that genuine homophobia does occur, and evangelicals perhaps have been guiltier than most at perpetuating it. Where there has been homophobia we need to repent. It is vital that the Church is true to its biblical DNA in being an inclusive and redeeming community.

We need to remember that homosexual practice is no worse than other sins, and given the standards of heterosexual holiness in today’s Church, beware of jumping to hypocritical judgement.

There’s no better time to subscribe to **CHRISTIANITY**
25% cheaper than the cover price plus a choice of free gift!

One concern is that many of the vocal comments in today’s Church on the issue are from Christians who have embraced the gay lifestyle and are very much advocating a change of theology.

There are many Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction who have embraced another path – the counter-cultural and costly teaching of the Bible, and perhaps for obvious reasons, choose, by and large, to remain anonymous.

They too have a story to tell, and often it is one of discovering that applying the teaching of scripture to their lives has become Good News to them. This is not to say it has been without pain and sacrifice, but in the midst of this, they have come to discover a redemptive gift. We need to salute these brothers and sisters as the courageous overcomers they are, and examples to all of us of sacrificial obedience.

Most of my ministry I have worked with students and on several occasions have had individuals confide in me pastorally about their struggle with same-sex attraction. I share the testimony of two of them (not their real names):

‘The celibate life – although with its challenges – can be a very “royal” one of depth and fulfilment. I wish this was mentioned much more often: celibacy is no “option two”. Beyond the issue of sexual orientation, it’s a lifestyle worth living, expressing oneself in creative and pastoral skills. The life of prayer that I have been offered by the Lord shows to me, in profound ways, that in Christ I can own the world and may make the world his own.’ **John**

‘During my teens I experienced same-sex attraction, and for periods of time felt that I was destined to be homosexual. Nobody really talks about that stuff, until they have experimented and made a final decision to embrace what they thought was the only option – come out as “gay”. But I ended up speaking about it to a chaplain who carefully guided me through the options, and what he felt the Bible taught. As I looked

at the issue myself, I recognised that the traditional biblical view pointed to same-sex practice as wrong, and less than God's best for my life. I made a tough decision not to pursue that lifestyle, and I'm so hugely thankful that I did.

'I'm now married to a beautiful woman who sharpens, challenges and inspires me, and we have amazing children who I totally adore – to think that they would not exist if I hadn't made that choice is unthinkable. I've now experienced a considerable change in sexual orientation through prayer, discussion and decision, and feel so incredibly blessed by the life I am living.' **Dave**

I conclude with a testimony from one of my close friends. I've known James for over 20 years, after he became a follower of Jesus while we were at university together. He came to accept the orthodox Christian perspective not because he was convinced by scripture, tradition or reason, but by experience. His experience, like that of John and Dave, is that embracing the truth, while not without cost, has set him free.

'I was a man who was perfectly content with being gay – and a vehement gay activist at that. I was also wholly faithful to my long-term male partner. However, it was while attending a well-known London evangelical church that I came into a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Soon enough, my ex-boyfriend came to Christ, and he and I, as well as being lovers to each other, became lovers of daily prayer and of God's word.

'I had spent my entire adult life affirming others in their gay identity. Imagine therefore what happened when, some time later, after a dozen or so appointments with a good but pretty regular therapist, and some incredibly accurate and powerful sessions of healing prayer, I rapidly began to find resolution around areas of my past where I had become stuck and my "fixed, always felt gay" identity began to unravel.

'In brief, I came to discover that God's word, which I had learnt to interpret as pro-homosexual practice, was the opposite. God doesn't judge anyone's same-sex attraction. I have come to learn, however, that it is not the way he has created us to be. I meet people nearly every day who are leaving behind the gay lifestyle and embracing Christ, not sexual attraction, as their true identity. [Now], 15 years on, I'm married and a dad, and my ex...a great man, is dead. I believed I was living a fulfilling and happy life as a (so-called) gay man. I now live a wholly amazing and much more deeply contented one having...matured into a fuller expression of what I stumbled across "by accident"...my...true sexual identity.

'Many of us are discovering God's word as interpreted over the centuries to be true, even in the face of incredible hostility from society and, more sadly, from other Christians.'

Greg Downes is Christianity magazine's theologian in residence and director of the Centre for Missional Leadership: <http://www.cml.uk.net/>

For a further resource that reflects the traditional evangelical stance, go to: www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/resources-for-church-leaders-biblical-and-pastoral-responses-to-homosexuality.cfm

About this article


Issue published [February 2013](#) Author Greg Downes

[Print this page](#)



[Search articles](#)

AD SERVING



Convenient
campaign
booking for
mobile phones,
iPhones
and
BlackBerrys

ADTECH

Find the
job you are
looking
for in the
Christian
sector!
only at...
JOBSEARCH