













## CHAPTER 1

### HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH: AN INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background and Rationale of the study

Homosexuality is known to be the romantic or sexual attraction between people of the same sex. It is a behaviour that is commonly believed to be caused by man's sinful nature, nurture and environment, and personal choice. How important each factor is, though, is an issue that is debated.<sup>1</sup> Such behaviour is said to have existed since thousands of years ago in (almost) every corner of the world. Recent studies have shown that contrary to what some authors thought and wrote in the past, homosexuality exists and has always existed in Africa just like in any other place (Epprecht 2008). However, the polarization and the 'coming out' concepts are believed to be westernized. In the Bible, such behaviour is believed to have been mentioned too. Homosexuality, or at least the "coming out publicly", seems to be becoming more common in recent years - most authors talk of the 1980s - and its acceptance seems to be larger in the Western or developed world than in Africa and Asia. The current fact is that homosexuality is tearing society, and worst of all: the church, apart. Different Christian denominations differ in their opinions for or against homosexuality. The United Methodist Church, like most mainline churches, is against the practice of homosexuality.

The United Methodist Church (UMC) is the largest Methodist denomination with both mainline and evangelical elements. The church is rooted in the lively renewal movement led by John and Charles Wesley in the Church of England. The Wesley brothers were missionaries to the colony of Georgia where they first arrived in 1736. Methodism in America began as a lay movement and it brought about the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1784. After a number of splits and mergers over issues concerning the power of laity in the administration of the church, slavery, gender, racism and the power of bishops in the denomination, the Methodist Church was formed in 1939 as a result of the combination of three churches: the

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.conservapedia.com/Homosexuality> retrieved in July 21st, 2010 (11h30)





























































relation to other fields and finally ask what must the church do. Cahill points that in using scripture as a resource for Christian ethics one engages in at least three dimensions: “specific texts on the issue at hand, specific texts on related issues, and general biblical themes or patterns” (Cahill 1994:64). A way to discern the truth of God in this matter would be the use of John Wesley’s famous ‘quadrilateral’ of scripture, reason, tradition and experience (A Discussion Guide for the Methodist people of Southern Africa 2003: 2).

A cursory survey of theological literature on homosexuality from the non-punitive but rejecting approach, delivers the following picture:

#### 4.1.1 What does the Bible say?

Genesis 19:1-29. The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behaviour or says little about it. Gen.19:1-29 is a good example of a passage often used in the debate of homosexuality which is irrelevant to the topic. This passage is about Sodom’s and Gomorrah’s inhospitality and lack of attention to the poor (Hays 1994:5-6) and (Soards 1995:15-16). Coleman (1995:59), however, argues that homosexuality is one among the many sins for which God condemned Sodom and to argue that there is no sexual interest of any kind in it would be an erroneous interpretation of the Bible. The scriptural passages in 2 Peter 2:7 and Jude 7 account for that. Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, seems to agree that a moral judgment is surely made against homosexual relations, in the passage cited above (1986:41).

Leviticus 18: 22; 20:13. In the light of the Old Testament, homosexual behaviour is listed along with a series of other sexual offences that are punishable by death. Hays (1994:6) asserts that Leviticus makes no distinction between ritual law and moral law. In each case, the church faces the task of discerning whether Israel’s traditional norms can be applicable to the new community of Jesus’ followers in today’s world. In the words of Soards (1995: 25):

*Scripture is a vital witness that speaks through the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the specific dynamics of concrete historical circumstances. Thus we labour to comprehend the meaning of the Bible for our lives today. We listen to the voice of the Bible, and then under the guidance of the Spirit we ask what God requires of us as obedience.*

Coleman (1995:62) suggests that while it is important to bear in mind some of the interpretations given to these passages for the sake of “understanding the general context of the time, it is wrong to conclude that *at the same time* the texts do not condemn homosexual activity”. The words in the biblical passage suggest that what is allowed for a man to do with a woman is not allowed for a man to do with another man.

The New Testament, like the Old Testament, seems to condemn the behaviour. Here Paul is the main character. The biblical texts commonly used in the debate are: I Cor. 6:9; I Tim.1:10; Rom. 1:18-32. In the first and second passages, Hays (1994:6-7) argues that Paul discusses a number of practices that are committed by the ‘lawless and disobedient’ and homosexual behaviour is one of them with no special attention shown towards the debate. However, the third biblical passage (Rom. 1:18-32) explicitly condemns homosexuality. Hays (1994: 7-9) interprets this passage in the following way: First, Paul gives an account of the universal fall of humanity which is manifested in various ungodly behaviours listed in verses 24-31. Second, Paul pays special attention to homosexual intercourse and explains the way in which human fallenness distorts God’s created order. In its fallenness humans reject the creator’s design. “They *embody* the spiritual condition of those who have ‘exchanged the truth about God for a lie’”. Third, homosexual acts are not worse than any other manifestations of human unrighteousness named in the passage (vv. 29-31). Lastly, Paul echoes a traditional Jewish idea: a homosexual act will not cause God to punish homosexuals; it is a punishment in its own.

In the same line of thinking, Soards (1995:23-24) states that the origins, motivations or gratifications of homosexual activity were not Paul’s or other ancient thinkers’ concerns. Paul’s discernments and declarations of God’s relationship to humans places homosexual acts outside the boundaries of God’s intention for humanity.

Coleman (1995:66-67) goes further in an attempt to answer comments some writers make on what exactly the New Testament (especially Paul) is reacting to when speaking of what is termed today as homosexuality. According to some writers the NT is referring to pederasty only (which was a particular form of homosexuality) and not homosexuality as a mutual consent relationship. Coleman suggests that even if pederasty is the theme in question, it does not mean that Paul would see homosexual relationship by mutual consent as God’s will. The language Paul uses particularly in Romans 1: 26-27

makes it difficult to conclude that Paul is not referring to something more than just pederasty.

#### 4.1.2 The wider biblical framework

Hays (1994:10-11) asserts that one has to consider how scripture frames the discussion in a broad way. First, texts such as Gen. 1-3, Mark 10:2-9, I Thess. 4:3-8, I Cor. 7:1-9, Eph. 5:21-33, and Heb. 13:4, provide the picture of marriage against which the bible few categorical negations of homosexuality must be read. Second, the bible provides us with accounts of the human bondage to sin (Rom.1: 21-22, 32). Once in the fallen state we are 'slaves of sin' (Rom. 6:17; 7), and God's act of liberation transforms and sets us free from the power of sin (Rom. 6:20-22, 8:1-11, cf.12:1-2). Third, Christian experience has intrinsically included in it an eschatological character. Hays states in this regard (1994:11): "The 'redemption of our bodies' remains a future hope; final transformation of our fallen physical state awaits the resurrection. Consequently, in the interim some may find disciplined abstinence the only viable alternative to disordered sexuality". Fourth, scripture along with many subsequent generations of faithful Christians bear witness of the possibility of living with freedom, joy, and service without sexual relations. Some passages even commend celibate life as a way of faithfulness (Mat.19:10-11; I Cor. 7).

Most authors seem to agree that the bible does not contain Jesus' teaching on homosexuality. Nonetheless, Soards (1995:28) mentions that Jesus discussed human sexuality when asked about his position on 'divorce' (Mark 10:3-4). And His "teaching shows that he understood heterosexual union in the context of marriage to be the norm of divinely intended human sexual behaviour". Still, from Jesus' lifestyle (celibacy), it seems that male and female sexual union is not a necessary condition for human fulfilment.

## 4.2 The Full Acceptance Position

Germond (1997: 188-197) uses a different approach when using the bible to assert the homosexuality debate. He suggests that there are two ways of reading and using

biblical evidence about homosexuality. One is within the framework of inclusion, and the other within the framework of exclusion. Each and every one of us reads and interprets the bible in the light of our life experience and the writers of the bible were people just like us who wrote the bible in the light of their cultural perspectives and assumptions. Traditional theology claims to be absolute, essential and universal. It believes that it speaks on behalf of God. Feminist and liberation theologians have challenged such a theology and demonstrated that it is in fact a particularistic, partisan, and contextually specific theology. It is anything but universal. Traditional “theology is culturally specific (generally Western), gender specific (generally male), racially specific (generally white) and class specific (generally the privileged class), and, as I wish to argue, specific in its assumptions about sexual orientation (overwhelmingly heterosexual)”. For Germond, it is not the origin of being heterosexual or homosexual that is important, but our experience of sexuality and the way this is mediated by our religious life, whether religious mediation leads to alienation or inclusion in the household of God. The theology of inclusion is central to the Christian message and it challenges every attempt of the church to create categories of exclusion.

#### 4.2.1 What does the Bible say?

Furnish (1994:18) presents four reasons why the question, “What does the bible say about homosexuality?” is misleading: First, such a question does not take into account the fact that the ancient world had no word for or concept of “homosexuality”. Second, it is simply wrong to assume that the bible says *just one* thing about any given subject when the bible is a collection of writings of different authors, times, and places. Third, those who ask such question fail to realize that it is part of their duty to determine what the biblical writings say as well as why these writings say what they do. And there is a fourth critical question for those who regard the biblical writings as authoritative: “How, if at all, may these ancient texts inform our understanding and give us moral guidance in today’s world?” Furthermore, two points need to be noted about terminology. First, there were no terms such as “sexuality”, “heterosexuality”, “homosexuality”, or “bisexuality” in the ancient world. These happen to be abstract concepts for which we are indebted to modern psychology. “It was universally presupposed that everyone was ‘heterosexual’ in the sense of being inherently (‘naturally’) constituted for physical union

with the opposite sex. Thus, there is no biblical passage about 'homosexuality' understood as a 'condition' or 'orientation.'" Second, neither the word "sodomite" appears in the Hebrew text of the O.T nor does it ever appear in the Greek text of the N.T. "These observations should remind us that translations can sometimes be misleading and that the exact meaning of a word always depends in part on the context in which it appears."

Nissinen (1998:123) states that the biblical material related to same-sex eroticism (called "homosexuality" today) is sparse, scattered and ambiguous. One thing they have in common, though, is their negativity towards sexual contact between people of the same sex. But it is also true that it is the modern community that unites the texts as a group of biblical references against what is called today "homosexuality" rather than the biblical material in its own right. If we want the bible and other ancient sources to contribute to today's discussion, the sensible hermeneutical principle has to be applied, which is, there must be a sufficient correlation between the topics discussed today and the ancient sources. The fact that biblical arguments are held normative in today's decisions should remind us that the arguments of the bible and other ancient sources focus on issues and phenomena of their time and space. Today's questions reflect the world we live in and the motivations for biblical interpretation and argumentation vary.

He goes further saying that it is quite possible that no biblical author approved of homoeroticism in any form they knew. What did they know about homosexuality in those times? "The perspective of biblical texts is clearly centred around physical sexual contacts, the background of which is seen in idolatry or moral corruption and the motivation for which is attributed to excessive lust (Romans 1) or xenophobia (Genesis 19; Judges 19). Love and positive feelings are not mentioned; responsible relationships based in love seem to be completely inconceivable." In this sequence, it would be unfair to claim that Paul would condemn all homosexuality everywhere, always, and in every form, since there is no such thing as "homosexuality in general, what exists instead is different kinds of same-sex activities and relationships that appear in specific cultural conditions - not in timeless spaces" (Nissinen 1998; 124).

Against these general hermeneutical observations key biblical texts in the current debate on homosexuality will briefly be discussed:

Germond (1997: 197- 199) looks at Genesis 1:27-8 and Genesis 2:18-25 as the two creation myths of the bible that have long been used as the basis for Christian ethics. The first text identifies human procreation as a blessing and links it to sexual differentiation but it does not identify procreation as essential to or primary for morally normative expressions of human sexuality. The second text is concerned not with the differences of the human partners, but their similarities. Here, human sexuality is understood as the expression and enrichment of human relationship. Furnish (1994:23) claims that although “the creation accounts presume and explain heterosexual behaviour, they do not command it. They are not about God’s will for individual members of the species but only about what is typical of the species as a whole. For this reason, they take no account whatever of the physically or mentally impaired, the celibate, the impotent - or of those who in modern times have come to be described as ‘homosexual’”.

Genesis 19: 1-29. Germond (1997: 197-199) argues that this biblical account and the obvious parallels in Judges 19:16-29, make it clear that what the men of Sodom intended was rape. The homosexual assault is one among Sodom’s transgressions and it can be understood as the concrete expression of the Sodomites’ lack of hospitality and general decadence. Furnish (1994: 19) argues that this is neither a story about homosexuality in general nor about homosexual acts performed by consenting adults but about the intent to do violence to strangers. Furthermore, one should note that all the biblical accounts paralleled to this account make the point of greed and indifference to those in need (Ezekiel 16), inhospitality in general (Mat. 10:12-15 and Lk.10:10-12), and a reminder of what happens to those who disobey God (Mat.11-23-24). As for Jude 7, this account does not have “homosexuality” in view. “The Greek text says ‘literally’ that Sodom and Gomorrah ‘went after *strange flesh*’ (NRSV footnote; italics added), an allusion to the fact that Lot’s guests, unbeknown even to the host himself, were actually angels disguised as men. Thus here, Sodom’s sin is viewed not as males violating other males but as mortals violating immortals.” McNeill (1994: 53-54) seems to agree with Furnish that the history of the interpretation of Gen.19 shows how prejudice and homophobia have distorted the message of scripture. Throughout the Old and New Testaments the sin of Gomorrah was understood as selfishness, pride, neglecting the poor, and lack of hospitality but never as homosexuality. The biblical passages in Ezekiel 16:49-50 and in Luke 10:12 account for that. Historically, the biblical condemnation of

inhospitality was transformed into a condemnation of homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13. These texts form part of what is known as the Holiness Code (which is universally recognised as no longer binding on Christians) and they may also be concerned with male prostitution in foreign cults (Germond 1997: 211-220). When commenting on the holiness code, Nissinen (1998: 44) makes three points:

“The prohibition of sexual contact between males in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 is done in a context of a polemic against a non-Israelite cult. Because the records of cultic homoeroticism are scanty and not unequivocal, however, historical description of this context is difficult.

The strategy of postexilic Israelites to maintain their distinct identity by, among other ways, separating from others strengthened the already existing taboos and social standards regarding sexual behaviour and gender roles, banning, for instance, castration, cross-dressing, and male same-sex behaviour; it was not simply the “objective” facts of physiology that established gender identity.

Israel shared with its cultural environment an understanding of sexual life as an interaction between active masculine and passive feminine gender roles. This interaction was the cornerstone of gender identity, but the concept of sexual orientation was unknown. Sexual contact between two men was prohibited because the passive party assumed the role of a woman and his manly honor was thus disgraced.”

I Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Here, Germond (1997:224) deals with the meaning of the two words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* and he concludes that these terms should not be given a translation indicating explicit and exclusive homosexual behaviour. Further, Paul’s intention when making use of such a rare word (*arsenokoitai*) is not clear. Even so, it cannot be ascertained that he meant to refer to homosexuality.

Romans 1:18-32. This biblical text does not condemn homosexual activity as a violation of God’s created order but as idolatry which is one of the many consequences of sin.

Nelson (1978: 184- 87) asserts that the bible never speaks of homosexuality as



a sexual orientation. It makes references to the subject but on certain kinds of homosexual acts that are probably believed to have been undertaken by persons whom the writers of the bible presumed to be heterosexually constituted. Nelson interprets Genesis 19:1-29 as God's judgement on sacral male prostitution - which includes homosexual rape - that is anathematized and which involves the cultic worship of foreign Gods denying Yahweh's exclusive claim. If one is fair to the text, one will find extreme difficulty to construe this text as a judgement against all homosexual activity. Cultic defilement is also Nelson's interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. In Romans 1:18-32, the same issue seems to be at stake, idolatry. It is true that Paul does not look at homosexual acts with favour, however if our understanding of homosexuality, its nature and consequences has changed over the times, then our understanding of the issue today differs from Paul's understanding of the issue then. Paul's other reference to homosexual acts and that of the writer of 1 Timothy is a list of practices which dishonour God and harm the neighbour and excludes people from the kingdom. Homosexual acts are not singled out for special censure.

#### 4.2.2 The wider biblical framework

Germond (1997:203) makes use of a theology of inclusion, the theology by which all biblical texts should be evaluated. A lesbian or gay person is neither redeemed by the interpretations of the bible nor even by the bible itself but by Christ. There are "messages of inclusivity that lie at the heart of the bible transcending the culturally bound messages that marginalise women, slaves, and gay and lesbian people". In the same line of thinking, Nelson (1978:188) affirms that we are all justified by the Grace of God in Jesus Christ. If at present, the norm of the new humanity in Jesus Christ, our best current moral wisdom and empirical knowledge cause us to question some of Paul's moral convictions on the status of women and the institution of human slavery, why should his judgements about homosexual acts be exempt?

One can easily notice the deep theological divide we find on our way in the search of a Christian ethos on human sexuality. Does the church need some help? Perhaps from other fields of study? Will they be sufficient to solve the problem we are living today? These questions are further explored in the next chapter.























































