

Contribution to the debate about human sexuality in the Baptist Union

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Much has, and will no doubt also be written, in contribution to the debate on human sexuality and how this relates to the Baptist Together family. This short paper is merely an attempt to show that the traditional view of human sexuality is not untenable and needs not to be given up in the twenty-first century. In order to do this I will not be bringing up new arguments or presenting new facts, but limit myself to restating and underlining a few arguments brought up by others. In other words, I will popularise existing scholarship.

Richard B Hays: Scripture review

Leading biblical scholar Richard B. Hays has written books on the use of Scripture by the apostle Paul and by the evangelists, a commentary on First Corinthians, a prominent book on 'the faith of Jesus Christ' and books on NT Ethics. In the latter,¹ Hays surveys the biblical texts that concern human sexuality and sexual purity/practice and concludes that Genesis 19 is irrelevant to the topic of homosexuality. However, he states that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are clear in forbidding male homosexual practice. In the New Testament this prohibition is not revoked (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10), but rather strengthened in Romans 1:18-32.

More importantly, Hays also shows that in the Bible human identity is not determined by our sexuality but by our creatureliness, which is an important observation vis-à-vis the current debates.² He concludes that neither the Bible nor the unanimous Christian tradition approves of homosexual practice.

R.T. France: women in leadership, homosexuality and the principle of love

In an article that has not drawn enough attention, R.T. ('Dick') France compares the issues of the position of women in the church and homosexuality.³ Surely, if you approve of women in the ministry of the church, you must also approve of homosexuality? France argues that this is not so. On the contrary, he argues that Paul appears to be 'liberal' with regard to women in ministry but 'conservative' with regard to homosexual practice.

Regarding women in ministry, he notes that there are two passages which appear to curb women's speaking in the church, both of which are problematic, viz. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (but see 11:5) and 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Over against these, there is a general pattern in the life of the New Testament church which is positive towards women. Jesus' positive attitude towards women, which can be seen in both Luke and John, is well known. Some women had prominent roles in the early church, including recognised positions in local congregations, as e.g. Romans 16 shows. Paul

¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

² Against this Freudian form of reductionism see also J. Gordon McConville, *Being Human in God's World. An Old Testament theology of Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2016) 65-66.

³ R.T. France, 'From Romans to the real world: biblical principles and cultural change in relation to homosexuality and the ministry of women' in S.K. Soderlund and N.T. Wright (eds), *Romans and the People of God. Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 234–253.

regularly speaks with appreciation of women in prominent positions and in Galatians 3:28 he even declares that in Christ there is neither man nor woman. Thus the New Testament clearly contains a trajectory toward eliminating distinctions between men and women with respect to ministries in the church.

On the other hand, no such positive development exists with regard to homosexuality. Although Genesis 19 is irrelevant, the texts from Leviticus and Deuteronomy 23:17-18 do count and the New Testament does not change the tone or contain anything to counterbalance these passages which forbid homosexual practice.

With respect to Romans 1, France is aware of the argument that Paul's thinking, his Jewish worldview, his anthropology, is culturally conditioned. Yet he responds that the apostle speaks out explicitly against both male and female homosexual activity and that the passage is a central element of Paul's argument in Romans. If we could set aside this passage on the basis of the mere fact that the author was an ignorant Jew, which other Bible passage would be safe from our subjective re-interpretation? It is important to note that when Paul uses the word 'nature' he refers not to the nature of any individual (which can differ per person) but to the essential make-up of creation (cf. Rom 11:24; 1 Cor 11:14). The conclusion has to be that whereas on women in ministry the Bible shows a trajectory towards openness, on homosexual activity there is only a consistent rejection.

France then discusses two approaches that are taken by evangelical Christians who struggle to accept what the Bible says. First, they can appeal to changes in culture, saying that today's loving type of homosexual praxis is different from that which is condemned in the Bible. France responds that modern studies on homosexuality may have introduced new terminology, but that it is not true that in antiquity there were no loving homosexual relationships and that Paul would have known this. As a well-educated scholar, Paul surely knew his world, yet he saw all homosexual activity as 'unnatural' because it is incompatible with God's intention for his creation.

The second approach is to put the principle of love above all other ethical norms. But surely love is not the only relevant ethical principle, and in a given situation it is often subjective what is the most loving thing to do. Most Christian ethicists agree on the fact that the more detailed moral rules cannot be so easily set aside in favour of love. The biblical data on homosexuality do not allow love such a role as arbiter either. Because all Scripture on the subject points in the same direction, we do not have the right to define 'love' in such a way that we contradict the biblical testimony. After all, this biblical testimony does not merely consist of the handful of 'negative' texts; we are rather faced with the total absence of 'positive' texts on the subject and, moreover, with the basic tone of biblical teaching and the biblical examples which indicate that God made man for heterosexual love and community. It is against this unequivocal background that the negative comments about homosexual behaviour need to be read. Homosexual activity is not in accordance with God's plan of creation for humankind, no matter how lovingly and well-motivated it may be.

Reidar Hvalvik and Tom Wright: historical context

The Norwegian professor Reidar Hvalvik states that a majority of both classical historians and biblical scholars acknowledges that the Old and the New Testament speak clearly against

homosexual practice.⁴ Hvalvik points to the important role played by John Boswell's 1980 book on homosexuality in the Greco-Roman background in the increased acceptance of homosexuality in the western world.⁵ But in response to Boswell and others, Hvalvik successfully counters modern claims that Paul and the people of his time did not know about what we now call homosexual orientation and about stable, lasting homosexual relationships. People in Antiquity may not have used our modern vocabulary, but the matter was well known, as for example Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* shows, and Paul shared the general cognisance of women and men who were innately attracted towards persons of the same sex, as his choice of words in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 shows.

At a popular level Tom Wright states very much the same as Hvalvik:

Throughout the early centuries of Christianity, *when every kind of sexual behaviour ever known to the human race was widely practised throughout ancient Greek and Roman society*, the Christians, like the Jews, insisted that human sexual activity was to be restricted to the marriage of a man and a woman.⁶

Hvalvik shows various weaknesses of Boswell's book and in so doing he confirms what France writes about the meaning of 'nature' in Paul, viz. that it refers to the order in creation. Hvalvik's discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:9 shows that the form of homosexuality condemned here by Paul is not pederasty (love for young boys) or sex with a male prostitute, but any form of homosexual relation.⁷ Hvalvik concludes that it is in no way true that our so-called 'new knowledge' sets aside the teaching of the New Testament.

Tim Wright: medical views of human nature

Some Baptists have drawn attention to the views of the GP Tim Wright, who well represents much modern thinking, so it is worth interacting with him. Wright argues that advances in medical science teach us to accept homosexuality and the church should follow the science. After historically seeing homosexuality as a sin and then as a sickness, medics now see it as a form of natural diversity. And LGBTQ people are at risk because they are not being accepted by society. Wright writes:

The medical profession now understands the LGBTQ+ community as being 'at risk' of mental health issues, depression, and an increased risk of suicide, particularly among the transgender community. Now why is that? There is no reason why being LGBTQ+ should make you at risk of mental health issues. However, if you have been rejected by society, if

⁴ Reidar Hvalvik, 'The Present Context in the Light of the New Testament and Its Background: The Case of Homosexuality', *European Journal of Theology* 24.2 (2015) 146–159.

⁵ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). See also Richard B. Hays, 'Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986) 184–215.

⁶ Tom Wright, *Simply Christian* (London: SPCK, 2006) 198; italics added.

⁷ The same conclusion e.g. in David F. Wright, 'Homosexuals or Prostitutes. The meaning of ARSENOKOITAI (1 Cor.6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10)', *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984) 125-153 en in David E. Malick, 'The Condemnation of Homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993) 479-492, at https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bsac/homosexuality_corinthians6.pdf.

you have been rejected by your friends, if you have been rejected by your family, if you've been rejected by your church then that's going to make you depressed.⁸

He therefore calls on the church to help and protect the LGBTQ community. There is no reference to the Bible and its interpretation here.

Dr Wright states that rejection can make homosexuals depressed. This may be true for many – thought surely not for all! – , but is it a valid argument in the present debate? Every religion and every worldview affirm certain behaviours and condemns others; do all worldviews then necessarily make people depressed?

Wright 'follows the science' in seeing homosexuality as a natural variation, but does this make it morally impregnable, as he seems to say? It does bring it in line with so many other forms of human behaviour. Not all behaviour is freely chosen, but it is still subject to ethical norms. As Hays wrote:

[T]he Bible's sober anthropology rejects the apparently common-sense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. Quite the reverse, the very nature of sin is that it is not freely chosen.⁹

And as others wrote,

The plight of the homosexual who has desires and passions that he or she did not choose is in fact the common plight of humanity. We all face the same challenge: how are we to live when what we want is out of accord with what God tells us we should want in this life?¹⁰

Lutheran biblical scholar Craig Koester states this in a way which makes sense to people from different backgrounds as well:

Lutherans have long recognized that people are subject to a wide range of inclinations which they have not freely chosen and which they may experience as natural, but which they are obliged to control. The other items Paul mentions alongside homosexual relations—covetousness, malice, envy, and so forth (Rom. 1:29)—manifest persistent tendencies in the heart which are 'natural' in the sense that people everywhere experience them, even though they have not chosen to do so. Paul included homosexual relations in his description of the human condition since these actions were viewed negatively by Jews and many others in the Greco-Roman world; but he casts his net broadly enough to show that all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Because sin affects everyone, we cannot say that those who have a proclivity to do something therefore ought to do it, even if it would seem natural to do it.¹¹

And to quote the other Wright, Tom, again:

⁸ <https://churchfromscratch.org/sexuality-medicine-and-the-church/> (accessed 04/01/2022).

⁹ Richard B. Hays, 'The Biblical Witness Concerning Homosexuality', in Maxie D. Dunnam and H. Newton Malony, *Staying the Course. Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) 65–84, here 74.

¹⁰ Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) 181.

¹¹ Craig R. Koester, 'The Bible and Sexual Boundaries', *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 375–390, at <https://gudribassakums.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/1993-bible-and-sex-boundaries-koester.pdf>

Christian sexual ethics ... is not simply a collection of old rules which we are now free to set aside because we know better. ... Nor can we appeal against the New Testament by saying that whatever desires we find inside our deepest selves must be God-given. Jesus was quite clear about that.¹²

With Tom Wright I conclude that the modern insights into the nature of homosexuality do not require us to accept it as part of the wonderful diversity within God's creation.

Jesus: sex, poverty and love

Jesus Christ was mentioned a few times above, but it is worth explicitly addressing the argument that Jesus was so much more 'loving' and 'pastoral' than his modern-day conservative followers. Is this true? First of all we need to realise stated that Jesus may have been very different from the religious establishment at the time, but that he did not proclaim the abolition of God's guidance for his people. In fact, it is well-known that with regard to issues such as divorce, oaths and coveting he was stricter than the Old Testament ever was. Loving, yes, but also outspoken and demanding in his specific expectations of his followers.

Secondly, although Jesus spoke much about poverty and care for the poor – and his teaching in this respect is still extremely relevant – he also spoke frequently about sexuality, both when challenged and of his own accord. It would be foolish to play the importance of these topics off against each other. The woman taken in adultery was forgiven, but also told not to sin again.

Koester reminds us of Jesus' practice when he writes:

Jesus' statements on matters of sexual expression set some of the most stringent standards in the Scriptures. Interpreters do well to acknowledge that, while considering how his norms relate to his actual dealings with people, Jesus exhibited an astonishing freedom to associate with sinners of all sorts without legitimating behavior of all sorts. His calls to repentance were coupled with acts of mercy (Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:30-32). He associated with a prostitute and defended an adulteress, without thereby legitimating prostitution and adultery. Infidelity remained a sin, but one that could be dealt with through receipt of forgiveness and amendment of life (Luke 7:37, 47; John 8:11).

The adage 'What Would Jesus Do?' is not dated.

Finally something different

The scholars I have introduced here and my added reflections lead me to continue to conclude that there is no scriptural support for sexual activity outside of marriage as defined as a lasting bond between a man and a woman. I am of course aware of the serious pastoral implications of this countercultural statement, but I see no way to avoid it.

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¹² Wright, *Simply Christian*, 199.

PS. Without agreeing with everything he writes, I warmly commend the book by David Bennett, *A War of Loves* which contains a foreword and endorsement by N.T. Wright.¹³ In this autobiographical book Bennett, who experienced same-sex attraction early on and lived as a homosexual, describes his conversion and sets out what he sees as the biblical teaching on sexuality.

¹³ David Bennett, *A War of Loves: The unexpected story of a gay activist discovering Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018). See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wni8cJYalis> and <https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/people/david-bennett>.