

The Bible, Character Ethics, and Same-Sex Relationships¹

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The traditional hermeneutical approach to biblical ethics, which asks the question “What ought we to do?”, has led us into some difficulties with regard to the question of same-sex relationships. In particular, it has made the church vulnerable to charges of selectivity with regard to our use of Scripture and failing to live up to biblical values such as mercy, compassion, and church unity. This paper suggests that adopting a hermeneutic based on character ethics, rather than on deontology or utilitarianism, would help Christians to avoid these pitfalls and enable the church to develop a response which is more faithful to Scripture as a whole.

Key Words

Same-sex relationships; Character ethics; Biblical hermeneutics; Church unity; Pastoral practice

Introduction

The question of whether Christians may be permitted to engage in same-sex relationships is a highly contentious one for Baptists, and indeed the church as a whole. For some, especially those living in countries in which same-sex marriage or civil partnerships have been made legal, the question is problematic for pastoral practice. What do we do if a gay couple comes to our church? What do we do if they want to get married or enter into a civil partnership, or are already married? For others, questions such as these are irrelevant, even meaningless. For them, the Christian view is, and always has been, that same-sex relationships are sinful, and those who engage in them have no place in the church. A less stringent view permits practising homosexuals to be part of the Christian community, but prohibits them from being in leadership roles.²

¹ This essay is a developed version of a paper given at the EBF Commission for Theology and Education Consultation on Homosexuality which took place in Smidstrup Strand, Denmark, 16-18 November 2016.

² For an overview and analysis of current shifting views amongst evangelicals with regard to the Bible and same-sex relationships see Ad de Bruijne, ‘Homosexuality and Moral Authority: A Theological Interpretation of Changing Views in Evangelical Circles’, in *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, ed. by Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas and Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2016), pp. 143- 62; Nigel G. Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 131-49.

Differences of opinion such as these have produced something of a crisis in the church. Discussion of the issue is often inhibited because of fear. Those who equate same-sex relationships with sin fear that, should practising homosexuals be accepted in our communities, the integrity of the church will be compromised. On the other hand, those who question this stance often fear that if they even raise the subject, the unity of the church will be threatened. Why have we got to this situation? Why do churches split, or threaten to split, over this issue? The reason, of course, is the Bible. However much we may say that there are cultural reasons for people being anti-gay, and pastoral reasons for being pro-gay, the issue ultimately boils down to this: does the Bible say that same-sex relationships are sinful, or not? And for centuries, the answer to this question has been considered obvious. Yes, homosexual behaviour is a sin, and those who engage in it should be outlawed from our churches. However, for many Christians today, this view does not adequately take into account other aspects of biblical teaching, for example, principles such as covenant relationships and fidelity. Nor does it make allowance for the profound suffering of many who find themselves excluded because of their sexual orientation. Serious disagreement ensues: ‘traditionalists’ think that their opponents are failing to obey clear biblical teaching, while ‘liberals’ consider their opponents to have a blinkered view which lacks compassion.³ The result is impasse, mutual suspicion, and often acrimonious division.

This is deeply troubling, for, as faithful readers of Scripture we cannot ignore Jesus’ prayer for unity amongst his followers (John 17.20-24), or Paul’s warnings against factionalism and division (such as I Corinthians 1.10-17). Should we not be doing our utmost to find a way through these difficulties? The question I want to address here, therefore, is this: how can we be faithful readers of Scripture on this deeply contentious question, without at the same time descending into disunity? It is not my primary purpose to give an exegetical study of the commonly cited passages – there are plenty of studies which do precisely that.⁴ Nor will I discuss contemporary scientific, medical, psychological, and cultural understandings of human sexuality, although these are important.⁵ Rather, I wish to focus on

³ For collections which present the arguments from differing viewpoints, see *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church*, ed. by Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); Dan O. Via and Robert A.J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); David L. Balch, *Homosexuality, Science and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁴ See, for example, Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001); Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 379-406; Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

⁵ See, for example, Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995).

how the Bible has been used in the debate, exploring in particular some of the assumptions which underpin what I am calling the ‘traditional’ approach. Is this approach sufficient to help us determine how we should respond to same-sex relationships in the pastoral setting? Has it allowed us to interpret Scripture with integrity? I will suggest that it owes much to deontological and utilitarian views of ethics, and that, although it might help us to determine our view with regard to the morality of same-sex relationships, it is not so helpful with regard to how we should respond pastorally, and is less than faithful to the teaching of Scripture as a whole. I shall go on to propose that a hermeneutic based on character ethics might enable us to find a way through the polarised opinions and lead us toward a more nuanced and compassionate pastoral response.

The ‘traditional’ approach to Scripture and the question of same-sex relationships

The hermeneutical approach most commonly adopted assumes that we can look to Scripture for instruction on the question of same-sex relationships. It asks whether homosexual activity is sinful or not, believing that if we find an answer we will know what to do in the pastoral setting. The natural first step is to look for passages which are understood to refer explicitly to homosexual activity – in particular, Leviticus 18.22; 20.13; Romans 1.26-27; I Corinthians 6.9-10 and I Timothy 1.9-11. The task is to look first for the ‘plain meaning of the text’, and, where that is uncertain, to determine using historical-critical methods, what the author’s intention might have been. Having established the view of the text on the morality of same-sex relationships, the procedure is to apply them in the contemporary setting.

From this starting point, the message of the Leviticus passages seems clear enough. Same-sex relationships are an ‘abomination’. In Romans 1, Paul sees homosexual activity as symptomatic of humanity’s rebellion against God. While some doubt that Paul has in mind here the kind of committed same-sex relationships which are increasingly common today,⁶ the majority view is that this passage is deeply disapproving of all homosexual activity. Things are less straightforward in I Corinthians 6.9-10 and I Timothy 1.9-11, in which the words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* appear, terms whose meaning is uncertain. Some argue that they refer to a kind of sexual exploitation or pederasty found in Hellenistic culture, or sexual promiscuity in the temples, rather than the same-sex relationships which are common today, and therefore that we cannot deduce a prohibition from

⁶ See, for example, Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*.

them.⁷ For many others, however, there is little doubt that these passages view same-sex activity with disapproval.⁸ At present, given the inconclusive nature of some of the evidence, it is the responsibility of each reader of Scripture to weigh up the evidence and come to his or her own decision.

Historical-critical exegesis, therefore, has enabled us to determine the Bible's teaching on the morality (or otherwise) of same-sex relationships. However, the questions cannot end there. If we designate same-sex relationships as sinful, what should we do when we are confronted with that sin in our communities? Since, as evangelicals, we profess to having a high view of Scripture and to a desire to be faithful to it, it seems appropriate that we return to the Bible for guidance. What, according to Scripture, is our pastoral responsibility?

Returning to Leviticus, we read that the 'abomination' must be punished: both parties are to be put to death (Leviticus 20.13). However, in twenty-first century Europe, the death penalty is no longer lawful. Leviticus 20.13 cannot, therefore, provide us with instruction as to our pastoral response. In I Corinthians 6.9-11, however, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* are said to be excluded from the Kingdom of God. If these terms are understood to refer to homosexual activity, it might be concluded that people who behave in this way following conversion are placing themselves outside of God's rule and so cannot be said to be a part of God's kingdom. Thus, although there is no direct instruction in these verses to exclude those in same-sex relationships from our communities, the church's tradition that this is the correct response seems a natural inference to make.

Nevertheless, Christians who desire to be faithful readers of Scripture cannot ignore the fact that in the New Testament passages under discussion, same-sex activity is only one example of behaviour deemed contrary to God's will. In Romans 1, Paul says same-sex activity is indicative of an idolatrous mind-set, but he goes on to list many other examples, including (*inter alia*) envy, covetousness, malice and gossip, boastfulness, and even foolishness. In I Timothy 1.9-11, the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* appear alongside murder, theft, perjury, slave-trading, and the rather vague phrase 'whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching'. In I Corinthians 6 they are included in a list of sins which Paul says will exclude people from the kingdom of God:

⁷ See, for example, Dale B. Martin, 'Arsenokoitês and Malakos: Meaning and Consequences', in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. by Robert L. Brawley (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 117-36; Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

⁸ The conservative view of the meaning of these terms is represented by Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 303-40; David F. Wright, 'Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ΑΡΣΕΝΟΚΟΙΤΑΙ (I Cor 6:9; I Tim 1:10)', *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984), 125-53.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites,¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers — none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. (I Corinthians 6.9-10 NRSV)

The conclusion is clear. If we deduce from these passages that people in homosexual relationships should be excluded from our communities (or from leadership), we must also exclude those who commit the other sins listed there. Faithful obedience to Scripture's demands means that we must exclude those who are (for example) wilfully greedy, who continuously gossip, and who cause quarrels, not to mention those who are envious, malicious and even foolish. In fact, the inclusion of 'idolaters' in the list should make us very cautious about declaring anyone an outsider. For in Romans 1, Paul insists that *everyone* is guilty of idolatry, and in chapters 6-8 he shows that the sanctification of believers is a work in progress: our transformation remains incomplete until the full glory of God is revealed. Until then the tendency for all of us to fall into all manner of idolatrous behaviour remains. We must, therefore, have very good reasons for excluding homosexuals from our communities while allowing other 'wrongdoers' to remain.

A normative pattern?

It should be obvious by now that the 'traditional' approach to Scripture has led us into something of a difficulty. For, while the problem of the morality of same-sex relationships may have been resolved to our satisfaction, the question of appropriate pastoral response remains problematic. The common inference has been that people in same-sex relationships should be excluded from church communities, on the grounds that they are failing to live under the rule of God. However, while church history shows that we have been fairly consistent in doing this, we have equally consistently ignored, or left unchallenged, the many other forms of idolatrous behaviour which are to be found in our midst. It is hardly surprising therefore, that those who believe that there is no place for same-sex relationships within the church are often charged with selectivity (with regard to their reading of Scripture) and hypocrisy (with regard to their response to sin).

Most thoughtful readers of Scripture realise, however, that rigid adherence to rules can (and does) seem to many to be at odds with biblical values such as compassion and mercy, values to which they wish to be loyal. Accordingly, it is often argued that Scripture also provides a pattern for human sexual relations which God's people should follow. The contention is that throughout the biblical literature, from the creation narrative (Genesis 1.26-28) to the metaphor of the church as the Bride of Christ (e.g. Ephesians

5.25ff; Revelation 21.2), heterosexual relations are assumed to be normative. This pattern is God's prescription for the wellbeing of his creation, and conformity to it is the best way for men and women to live. By the same token, to deviate from this pattern is to violate God's will.⁹

Of course, merely referring to the existence of such a pattern cannot in itself provide us with instruction. We can only infer that behaviour is either congruent with or at odds with it. Since the pattern consists of male-female relationships, it follows that same-sex relations fall into the latter category. It is often held that those who wilfully do not conform to this pattern should desist from the behaviour or be excluded from the church. The logic is that those who persist are deliberately setting themselves against God's purposes for his creation – not only bringing disorder into his orderly design, but also being knowingly disobedient.

This, however, presents us with a difficulty. The story of the creation of man and woman tells of a time when there was no disordered sexuality of any sort. And as the rest of Scripture attests, the world is no longer in this original, ideal state. Rather, it, and all human behaviour, indeed all human desire, is in a state of deep disorder.¹⁰ So it must be concluded that *all* human sexual behaviour is disordered. We cannot therefore insist that the pattern described in the pre-Fall narrative be prescriptive for all, when no-one (no matter what their sexual orientation might be) can hope to live up to the standard.¹¹ What we can do, however, is keep this ideal state in view and attempt to bring order into a disordered world. The traditional way of doing this has been to say that some regulation of human sexuality is required, and, rather than disbaring all sexual activity altogether, allow for heterosexual relationships within the confines of marriage. As Paul says in I Corinthians 7.2, 'because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband'. Marriage, then, is given to enable us to keep orderliness in our communities in a (pale) reflection of the kind of order which God ordained before the Fall.

There is little doubt that this approach to Scripture helps to move the argument forward. Avoiding the pitfalls of proof-texting, it takes the whole of Scripture into account. It also seems to help with difficulties regarding pastoral responsibility. Acknowledging that all human sexuality is disordered, it is taught that sexual activity should be kept within the confines of heterosexual marriage. In this way God's pattern is honoured, and order maintained. It follows that same-sex relationships cannot be accepted in the

⁹ Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same-Sex Relationships* (Nottingham: IVP, 2015), pp. 81-95; Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 379-406; Ulrich W. Mauser, 'Creation and Human Sexuality in the New Testament', in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, ed. by Brawley, pp. 3-15.

¹⁰ See Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, p. 24.

¹¹ David P. Gushee, *Changing our Minds*, 2nd edn (Canton: Read The Spirit Books, 2015), pp. 97-98.

Christian community, and that homosexuals should be celibate. If it is asked how this can be compatible with our knowledge of a merciful and loving God, it is answered that God's ordained pattern can be nothing but loving and merciful in its intention. Pastoral responsibility, therefore, entails supporting homosexual people in the struggle that they may have to remain within God's good and perfect will.

This is a very attractive approach to take, and indeed many people of same-sex orientation have found great comfort in it. Importantly, it seems congruent with the biblical evidence. Jesus (certainly) and Paul (probably) led celibate lives, and both expressed the view that it is better for believers to be free of family responsibilities. Indeed, Jesus saw a conflict of interests between family and discipleship, a conflict which is best resolved by remaining celibate and eschewing the comforts of family life for the sake of the kingdom (e.g. Matthew 19.10-12; Luke 5.11; 9.61, 62; 14.26, 27). Paul put it another way: family responsibilities distract people from the spreading of the gospel, preventing them from devoting themselves to being disciples of Christ (I Corinthians 7). According to the New Testament, therefore, voluntary celibacy is preferable to the married state. As Michael Vasey says, for Jesus, Paul and the early church, 'The new society that Jesus was creating was one in which membership was based not on marital, ethnic or social status but on adoption into the new humanity forged by Christ himself.'¹² Now, of course, this teaching does not constitute a prohibition, and there are other passages within the New Testament which clearly teach that marriage does have a place in the church and indeed should be honoured (Ephesians 5.21-33; Hebrews 13.4). The two teachings need to be held in tension. The idea of heterosexual marriage in Christian thinking is inextricably bound up with the command to procreate (Genesis 1.28), and there is undoubtedly a responsibility to bring up children to become faithful disciples of Christ.¹³ However, in many churches there can be an (unspoken) expectation that Christians *should* marry and have children – which is quite a move away from the teaching of Jesus and Paul.¹⁴

Nevertheless, even if we were to embrace the teaching that celibacy is the better state for Christians and encourage singleness for the sake of the Gospel (which we seldom do), it is still true that heterosexual people would have the option to remain single or to marry, while homosexual people do not. At this point, it is often argued that same-sex attracted people are no different from other single people, or those who are unable to be in a sexual

¹² Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, p. 33.

¹³ See, for example, Stephen Holmes' (Augustinian) argument that same-sex relationships are inadmissible because the primary purpose of marriage is procreation, in *Two Views on Homosexuality*, ed. by Sprinkle, pp. 166-93.

¹⁴ Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem*, pp. 47-52.

relationship for whatever reason: they must simply be strong and accept that celibacy is God's will for them.¹⁵ Now it is true that some Christian homosexuals feel that this is the right response, and they live their lives in accordance with this. Others, however, detect double standards. They point out that there is a difference between lack of opportunity and prohibition. A prohibition against same-sex relationships denies homosexual people permission to have sexual relations, at any time and under any circumstances – something which does not apply to heterosexual people. Moreover, marriage is much more than a matter of being able to indulge in sexual intercourse with impunity. While the concept of marriage varies from culture to culture, inherent in it are agreements with regard to property, inheritance, and companionship.¹⁶ Therefore, in denying homosexual people the possibility of marriage, or even of intimate relationship in a recognised partnership (whether it is 'civil' or 'blessed' by the church), we are also denying them the companionship and legal security with regard to property and inheritance which married couples may take for granted. That this causes much suffering to a great many people leads many to conclude that the church's conventional stance of prohibition is at odds with the biblical teaching on compassion and mercy – not to mention principles of covenant relationship and fidelity (see, for example, Genesis 31.43; II Samuel 5.3; I Samuel 18.3; Psalm 55.20).¹⁷

A third approach: character ethics

Thus far we have noted two approaches which have dominated attempts to answer the question of what the Bible has to say about same-sex relationships. The first seeks instruction and the second argues from a 'normative' pattern. In the first, the hermeneutical assumption is that the Bible provides us with rules for living. Once the rule is found, it must be followed simply because it is found in Scripture. The second recognises the importance of being able to say *why* same-sex relationships are to be considered sinful, and finds them to be incongruent with God's plan for his creation. As we have seen, however, these two approaches have raised some serious difficulties with regard to our understanding of the texts and our pastoral practice. First, we must acknowledge that there is still some doubt as to the exact meaning of some of the most salient texts. Second, it is not always clear how these texts relate to other aspects of biblical teaching, for example with regard to pastoral practice. Third, the focus on same-sex

¹⁵ See, for example, Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 402.

¹⁶ See Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2006).

¹⁷ See, for example, Gushee, *Changing our Minds*, pp. 99-105.

relations as the central issue in these texts is a highly selective approach which opens us up to charges of hypocrisy and lack of integrity.

These two hermeneutical approaches reflect the ways that ethics has been discussed in western philosophy over the last few hundred years. The first stems from deontology, which looks for rules to follow, and the second is close to (rule) utilitarianism, which seeks to find the greatest good for the greatest number. Both take the question “What ought we to do?” as their starting point. Both wish to find instruction to put into practice. Given the dominance of these approaches in Western religious and secular ethical thinking, it is natural that the church should also be influenced by them.

In recent years, however, an alternative way of approaching ethics has been gaining favour, one which might help to find a way through these difficulties. Increasingly, the quest for rules seems to many to be simplistic and sometimes even counterproductive. Who, for example, decides who should make these rules? Rules which apply well in one setting may not transfer into another. Utilitarianism, in which the rationale for ethical decision-making is to seek the greatest good for the greatest number, remains highly influential. However, this can (and frequently does) lead to prescriptions for happiness which fail to acknowledge human difference. Moreover, the majority is not always right.¹⁸

Because of these problems, some prominent ethicists (Christian and non-Christian alike) have been looking to the idea of the virtues to help them find a new way of thinking.¹⁹ Character (or virtue) ethicists suggest that certain habits of mind – such as temperance, patience, and perseverance – can, if developed, enable us to live wisely and create thriving communities. The crucial difference is that the central ethical question changes from “What ought we to do?” to “What kind of people should we be?” Thus, ethics becomes a matter of character and wisdom rather than duty or the pursuit of happiness (the good) for the majority. Rules may still be necessary, and indeed are, but even more important is the ability to use them wisely for the benefit of our communities.

These central ideas of character ethics have become highly influential. In psychology, for example, there is increasing recognition of a need for wise practitioners who are not hidebound by procedures and measurement of outcomes.²⁰ The ideas are also proving deeply influential in theology. In particular, Stanley Hauerwas has argued that Christian ethics cannot be reduced to a matter of obedience to rules. Rather it is concerned with

¹⁸ For an introduction to these major theories see John Deigh, *An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

²⁰ See, for example, Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

developing habits of mind which help to form ‘communities of character’. In order to find out how to do this, we should look to Scripture and the example of those around us. Hauerwas says,

Christians claim to attribute authority to Scripture because it is the irreplaceable source of the stories that train us to be a faithful people. To remember, we require not only historical-critical skills, but examples of people whose lives have been formed by that memory. The authority of Scripture is mediated through the lives of the saints identified by our community as most nearly representing what we are about. Put more strongly, to know what Scripture means, finally, we must look to those who have most nearly learned to exemplify its demands through their lives.

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As we follow these examples we develop the habits of mind which are distinctively Christian. They become part of the fabric of our lives, informing our moral decision-making and pastoral responses to the human experiences which we encounter in our communities. In this way we can build a church which will demonstrate to the world ‘how all people will live in the kingdom of God’.²²

Character ethics as a hermeneutical lens

How does this affect how we interpret Scripture? It means that the aim of reading the Bible is not primarily to find rules, but to discover what kind of people we should be, both individually and in community. The experiences and struggles of Israel and the early church teach us what it means to be the people of God, as do the traditions (wisdom, prophecy, epistles) left to us by those who documented and reflected on them. We read the stories of individuals (Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Peter, for example) whose lives demonstrate the values and attitudes pleasing to God. And the prime exemplar, of course, is Christ himself. James McClendon notes, ‘Whatever difficulties scholars may find in the re-creation of the chronological biography of Jesus, his character is the touchstone of the Christian life.’²³ So, as Philippians 2.5-11 tells us, the answer to the question, “What kind of people should we be?” is this: Christians are to be people whose lives are characterised by humility, self-sacrifice, and compassion.²⁴

²¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 1984) (2nd edn, 2003), p. 70; see also his *Communities of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

²² Nancey Murphy, ‘Using MacIntyre’s Method in Christian Ethics’, in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, ed. by Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 32.

²³ James Wm McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories can Remake Today’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), p. 33.

²⁴ For this approach to Scripture and ethics see, for example, David S. Cunningham, *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law* (London: Routledge, 2008); *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Stephen E. Fowl and

From this perspective, an appeal to Scripture for guidance with regard to same-sex relationships is not concerned primarily to determine what we should *do*, but rather, to discover how we can be wise and faithful followers of Christ. It remains appropriate to start with pertinent passages, using the historical-critical tools at our disposal. Crucially, there will still be disagreements as to their interpretation.²⁵ The difference will be, however, in how we proceed from there – in particular, how we act on our conclusions in the pastoral setting and how we relate to those with whom we disagree.

For those who conclude that these passages do not prohibit same-sex activity, pastoral care of homosexuals will, in most respects, be no different from that of anyone else. We will accompany them through the struggles and cycles of life as we would any other member of the congregation. However, we must also recognise that, for many Christians, this view is deeply disturbing. We will have to ask ourselves what it means to be communities characterised by humility, self-sacrifice, and compassion, especially when there is disagreement over this issue. Particular problems will arise if questions are raised regarding blessings or marriage. While some will consider this compatible with Scriptural principles such as covenant relationship and fidelity, others may not, and questions with regard to how far we should accommodate to prevailing and/or changing cultures, customs, and practices will have to be explored with sensitivity and discernment on all sides.

For those who conclude that these passages do require a prohibition, the pastoral responsibilities are rather different. Since this is in effect a matter of ‘law’, the aim will be to carry it out with wisdom and compassion, following Jesus’ example. Two things stand out in this regard. First, Jesus insists that law should serve the community and not the other way around (e.g. Mark 2.23-27). In other words, law is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Second, it is clear from the stories of Jesus’ life that he loved sinners and righteous alike. As James Gustafson says, this was ‘indiscriminating care for the just and the unjust’.²⁶ Nevertheless, it is equally clear that he took great exception to self-righteousness and hypocrisy on the part of religious leaders. When confronted by people whose main concern was to uphold the law, he refused to allow them to take the moral high ground, demanding that they ‘take the log out of their own eye’ before judging others (Matthew 7.5). Further, he was criticised for associating with those who had been declared ‘sinners’ by the religious authorities to such an extent that he was accused of

L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

²⁵ See, for example, Richard B. Hays, ‘Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies’ and Luke Timothy Johnson, ‘Debate and Discernment, Scripture and Spirit’, in *Virtues and Practices*, ed. by Murphy et al. pp. 214-16; 215-220.

²⁶ James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 244.

being a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11.19). If we wish to follow Jesus' example, then we will have to do some serious self-examination. Are we concerned primarily for the purity of our communities or for the care of those who are marginalised outsiders? Are we being consistent in our application of 'law' – applying the same high standards to ourselves in all areas of our lives as we require from homosexual people? At the very least, Jesus demands that we acknowledge our own weakness, before making judgements about other people.

Whichever conclusion we reach, a hermeneutic based on character ethics requires us to be highly cautious with regard to how we implement it in the pastoral setting. In both cases, we have to be acutely aware of the effects of our decision, both with regard to the individuals concerned and for the community as a whole. In both cases, we have to look to ourselves – being honest about our attitudes and motivations, and constantly on the alert for a lack of compassion, self-sacrifice, and humility in our actions and words. A character ethics approach does not require us to throw out the idea of law or principles. It does, however, challenge us with regard to our *attitude* to them, and how we put them into practice. It teaches us to filter our desire to be faithful to the biblical texts through the lens of humility, self-sacrifice, and love, and having done so, to carry out our decisions with compassion and grace.

Same-sex relationships and church unity

If this approach urges us to think carefully with regard to the pastoral care of individuals and congregations, it also has profound implications with regard to our understanding of our relationship to the Bible itself – no matter on which side of the argument we find ourselves. In the first place, it forces us to be honest about our failure to live up to our own standards with regard to obedience to Scripture. There can be no doubt that Christians have been guilty of selectivity and double standards, paying attention to certain sins and instructions whilst ignoring many more. As we have seen, the main thrust of the argument in Romans 1 is that we are all guilty of idolatry in one way or another. An attitude of humility and self-sacrifice might lead us to consider why the church has become so preoccupied with the question of same-sex relationships. As is frequently noted, Jesus was much more concerned with the idolatry with regard to money and power than he was with that which expresses itself in sexual misdemeanour (Matthew 6.24; Ezekiel 28; Revelation 18) – something which the church throughout its history has often forgotten.

Second, an attitude of self-sacrifice, humility, and compassion must surely lead us to admit that we might not be right. Whatever our conclusion

with regard to the question of same-sex relationship and the Bible, there is a chance that we might have got it wrong. The truth in all its fullness will not be revealed to us in the here and now. The question “What ought we to do?” carries with it the quest for certainty, and it is natural for us to want Scripture to provide it. However, our interpretation will always be incomplete and faulty – simply because of our human weakness. We see through a glass darkly, and will continue to do so until the end times, and we need the grace to agree to disagree.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the traditional hermeneutical approach to biblical ethics, which derives from deontology and utilitarianism, has led us into some difficulties with regard to the question of same-sex relationships. While it may help us with regard to the morality of homosexual activity, it has been less helpful when it comes to our pastoral response. Despite some exegetical uncertainties, the majority understanding is that same-sex relationships are disallowed by Scripture. However, the traditional inference that practising homosexuals should be excluded from our communities, or at least from leadership positions, has made the church vulnerable to charges of selectivity in its use of Scripture, hypocrisy with regard to recognising and tackling sin, and a failure to live up to biblical values such as compassion and mercy – charges which we must take very seriously indeed. Moreover, we have fallen into a state of impasse in the debate and deep division amongst ourselves.

In order to help us find a way through these problems, a hermeneutical approach based on character ethics was proposed. Rather than look for Scripture to tell us what to do, our hermeneutical starting-point is the question “What kind of people should we be?” The biblical narratives teach us how to live lives which are pleasing to God. Above all, we make Christ our ‘touchstone’ in all our ethical and pastoral decision-making and continuously look to Him to teach us how to be communities of people whose lives are characterised by humility, self-sacrifice, and compassion. How does this help us respond to same-sex relationships while maintaining unity amongst ourselves? Two suggestions have been made: first, with regard to our pastoral response, and second, with regard to our relationships with each other.

We will still reach different conclusions as to the interpretation of the salient texts. We may still decide that same-sex relationships should be prohibited in our communities, or that such a view is incompatible with principles of mercy and covenant. The difference, is, however, in how we proceed from there. Crucially, when we look to Christ’s example, we are

reminded that law and principle are given to serve and not enslave, and that we need constantly to examine our own lives before passing judgement on others. Our pastoral response to the question of same-sex relationships will be marked by a concern for the individuals involved and the community as a whole, rather than by a need to follow precept. We are not asked to ignore our conscience, but to act with wisdom and compassion towards others, and with self-scrutiny. Bearing in mind Christ's habit of associating with 'sinners', we will remember Paul's insistence that we *all* fall into this category. The more we adopt this attitude, the less we will be open to the charges of hypocrisy and double standards which are so frequently made against us.

This approach also informs our understanding of our relationship with Scripture itself, and with each other. An attitude of self-sacrifice, humility, and compassion should, at the very least, lead us to an admission: our interpretation of Scripture might be faulty, and it may be necessary to agree to disagree. Above all, there will be no place for the acrimony and vitriol which too often characterises debate on this subject. We will have to make decisions and to act on them, but obedience from this perspective means seeking wisdom rather than certainty, unity rather than unanimity, and a readiness to learn from our mistakes. Baptists have always sought to look to Christ, our 'touchstone', and to make him our highest authority. On the eve of his death, his desire was that his followers live in unity. Perhaps, even with regard to this most contentious of issues, we can go some way towards seeing an answer to his prayer.

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