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Sexuality, Symbol, Theology and Culture: A Reply to Francis Bridger

PETER REISS

In a recent article Francis Bridger took issue with what he saw as a 'revisionist' understanding of the Bible's understanding of homosexuality.[1] In the article, which was an eirenic refutation of a previous more 'liberal' approach, he found both exegetical and theological difficulties with the 'revisionist' argument, and argued for a traditional view, which finds no acceptance of homosexuality in Christian understanding. His article covered a broad area, including analysis of biblical texts and a discussion on the role of symbol in theology.

I find the article worrying in several respects. First, the article gives the impression that the debate about homosexuality is essentially an academic concern. Even where pastoral concern is mentioned it is in terms of methodology. But the centre of the problem is people — 'gay' and 'straight', if we must label them — struggling to find God and their own identity. There are many Christian people, spiritual and mature people, who are gay, some open about their orientation, many more keeping their real feelings hidden for fear of rejection. Few heterosexual Christians are aware of the pain of their brothers and sisters who feel homosexual in their sexual orientation.

Sexuality is at the heart of our identity. Our knowledge of why some people are sexually attracted to others of their own sex (or to those of the opposite sex) is still very limited. Sexuality remains a profound mystery, the realm of theory and hypothesis as much as of fact.

We also need to be much more aware of how the Graeco-Roman world understood sexuality and sexual relations. Again few Christian writers have researched in any depth the recent articles and books which have analysed the culturally-dependent view of sexuality prevalent at the time of Paul. Scroggs' book,[2] referred to by Bridger, though ten years old now, is one of the few that considers seriously the 'homosexuality' of the ancient Mediterranean world, but his study is deficient because he views ancient homosexuality solely through the lens of pederasty.

Further, Christian articles seldom reflect critically on the use of terms like 'homosexuality', 'sexuality', 'heterosexual'. Few writers take note of the 'essentialist-constructionist' debate concerning sexuality. Christians will not have a credible voice in society if we are unaware of the informed

1 Francis Bridger 'Entropy, Sexuality and Politics: A Reply to Michael Williams' *Anvil* vol. 10, 1993, pp 111-123.

2 R. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1983.

scientific debates going on around us, if we claim biblical authority for passages whose background we have not researched adequately, and if we use imprecise language and terms which are currently the subject of serious debate. In general Bridger's article seems to place the Bible so far above what he calls 'humanistic social sciences' that the Bible becomes immune from criticism. We should not be afraid of what the social sciences can teach us. A Christian response to issues of sexuality must interact with the most recent of medical, psychological, sociological and historical studies.

In this paper I wish to take each of the three areas outlined above and develop what I believe is a more acceptable approach to Paul's writing in Romans 1: 26-27. Unashamedly I am driven by a pastoral concern, having good friends, Christians, who are wrestling with these issues in themselves, and also with a desire to take seriously what Scripture says.

Why are some people homosexually oriented?

There is no accepted theory as to why some people are attracted to others of their own sex: nor why most people are attracted to those of the other sex. If anything, the evidence points to a multiplicity of factors. In the 1960s and early 1970s, psychological reasons were often given to explain homosexual orientation; reasons included a weak father or a dominant mother, or an inability to relate to the 'other'. Such claims were normally based on studies done using patients who were already having counselling (e.g. Bieber's work), in other words those who were already not happy with their sexual orientation. Not surprisingly they were found to have 'problems'; that was why they had sought help in the first place. The idea that homosexuality is a disorder has persisted in the Church: for instance, the 1986 Vatican letter to American Bishops, 'On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons', says homosexual orientation is a disorder, despite the fact that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the category of mental disorders in 1973.

There is also no firm agreement as to when, if ever, sexual orientation becomes fixed. Some would argue that after puberty, in the early teens, one's sexual orientation has become apparent; others would claim that it can develop and evolve throughout one's life. Many 'come out' only much later in life, not least because only then do they have the strength to confront a society which is so hostile towards homosexuals. Some are more exclusively 'homosexual' than others.

Recent surveys find homosexual people, in general, as 'normal' and as stable as heterosexual people.

> In sum it is about as easy to change a gay man into a happy straight as it is to change a straight man into a happy gay — not very.[3]
>
> There is no evidence that most homosexuals are emotionally maladjusted — a fact that is remarkable when one considers the anti-homosexual prejudices of our society.[4]

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3 J. Hyde *Understanding Human Sexuality* (4th ed.), McGraw Hill, New York 1990, p 437.

4 W. Masters, V. Johnson & R. Kolodny *Human Sexuality* (4th ed.), Harper & Collins, New York 1992, p 399.

All evidence seems to point to a multiplicity of factors both physical (nature) and psycho-social (nurture) which *can* produce homosexual or heterosexual orientation. Evidence also shows that more men than women are homosexually oriented. Hyde, for instance, reckons two per cent of men and one per cent of women are exclusively homosexual, and eighty per cent of men and ninety per cent of women exclusively heterosexual.[5] Bisexuality is a vague and rather unsatisfactory term, but the fact is that a considerable minority of people have had sexual relationships with members of their own and the opposite sex.[6]

What is also clear is that male homosexuals *tend* to be more promiscuous (measured in number of sexual partners) than male heterosexuals; but men are also more promiscuous as a sex than women, and female homosexuals are generally less promiscuous even than female heterosexuals. Studies recording number of partners however vary greatly.[7] It would be surprising, given the variety of cultures, if studies did show a uniform pattern. After all studies giving number of partners of heterosexuals would also vary greatly depending on the survey group and its culture.

Hormonal imbalance is an unlikely cause of homosexual orientation, though the prenatal development of the foetus, more particularly the development of the hypothalamus has been suggested as a possible cause. Sufficient research has not yet been done in this area to substantiate or reject this hypothesis.[8] A recent research study suggests that there may be some genetic factor that leads to homosexual orientation.[9] The study found a common piece of the X chromosome in many of the male homosexual subjects. A study also found that the proportion of the male relatives on the mother's side who were homosexually oriented was much higher than average. The percentage of homosexually oriented men on the father's side was average. Such evidence would support a genetic factor carried in the mother's (X Chromosome) genes. Such research is by no means conclusive or exhaustive, but it needs to be evaluated.

Less 'objectively', but no less importantly, the voices of homosexually-oriented people need to be heard. There are many people who say that their

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5 Hyde, op. cit. p 434.

6 'Bisexual' as a term is vague because it can cover both those who have moved through one orientation to another and who are consistent in their orientation, and those who have sexual relations with people of both sexes in the same time-period. Technically Hyde's twenty per cent of men and ten per cent of women includes those who may have had a single homoerotic experience, but otherwise are consistently heterosexual or vice versa.

7 For overviews of several surveys see Masters, Johnson and Kolodny, op. cit. p 377; also J. Greenberg, C. Bruess and D. Sands, *Sexuality: Insights and Issues*, Wm C. Brown, Dubuque, Iowa 1986, p 369. The Bell & Weinberg survey done in 1978 was conducted solely in the Bay area of San Francisco, an area by no means representative of the United States; nevertheless it is quoted, as if representative, by Stanton Jones of Wheaton College. To use Bell & Weinberg, yet to denounce Kinsey (as he does by implication) as 'badly biassed' for overestimating the number of homosexuals, is to reveal a serious bias in his own article. S. L. Jones, 'The Loving Opposition', *Christianity Today*, July 19th, 1993, p 23.

8 Hyde op. cit., pp 438-440.

9 A study by scientists at the US National Cancer Institute's Laboratory of Biochemistry, reported in *Time*, July 26 1993 (vol. 142.4), pp 52-55.

homosexual orientation — that is their finding of others of their own sex erotically attractive — is a natural (to them) feeling, and a part of who they are. Certain sectors of the Church have completely ignored the feelings and statements of those whom they condemn, as if they are of no value. We may ultimately disagree, but the voice of the 'opposition' should be heard and listened to.

What is fairly clear is that homosexually-oriented people feel that such orientation is an integral part of their identity and personality. Secondly, it would seem that women differ from men in the way they view sex and sexual relations. Female homosexuals may have more in common with female heterosexuals than with male homosexuals. The sex of a person is more basic than his or her sexual orientation. If this is so we should distinguish between male and female sexuality, and so between male and female homosexuality, and be careful about referring to 'homosexuals' as if all are the same. Men and women are different in their understanding of sexuality, and sexual orientation is a complex issue.

The general understanding of sexual relations in the time of Paul

Different ages and cultures understand sexual relations and sexual behaviour very differently. The Graeco-Roman world differed from our age in its understanding of sexuality. We use words like 'mutuality', 'choice' and 'intimacy', and we stress the importance of freedom and the absence of coercion and force. The ancient world saw sexual activity within a political framework; sexual relations confirmed the dominant order, and relations which challenged that order were condemned.

While we see sex as mutual, the Greco-Roman world had no such governing principle; the distinction was made between the 'active'/ penetrating/ dominant partner and the 'passive'/ penetrated/ dominated partner. A citizen male might have sexual relations with his wife, with his slaves, both male and female, and with prostitutes, without breaking the law. None of such partners were after all his equal in status. Sexual acts confirmed the hierarchy of society; sex was inherently unequal, and meant to be so.

Classical Athens (late fifth century BCE) considered pederastic relations between older citizen and younger to be acceptable, and had built in safeguards which supposedly regulated such behaviour, and the youths who were the 'passive' partners would soon become the 'active' partner, and also marry. Such behaviour was considered by society in general to be quite acceptable. What was not aceptable was for an older man to continue in the role of the passive partner. It also seems that sexual relations between citizen males were intercrural, that is the active partner ejaculated between the thighs of the passive, and did not actually penetrate him. Penetration would be dishonouring to someone soon to become a full voting citizen. Xenophon tells us how the passive partner was not to show any pleasure in this:

> ... the boy does not share in the man's pleasure in intercourse, as a woman does; cold, sober, he looks upon the other drunk with desire.[10]

10 Xenophon, *Symposium* 8: 21.

Vase paintings also support this principle, although there are some exceptions. Such was the ideal; practice obviously may have been somewhat different.[11]

The Roman Empire inherited Greek values but also had its own values and customs. In the time of Paul we find two opposing views present in society: a more liberal, Greek based view, and a more conservative, traditional view.[12] However what they both shared was the phallo-centric non-relational view of sexual activity found in Classical Athens. Where they differed was in whether same-sex relations were acceptable at all or not. To some, homosexual relations were 'unRoman', but it is always the voluntary taking of the passive role which is what is soundly condemned. So Julius Caesar never lived down his 'passive' relationship with the King of Bithynia.[13]

In Jewish thought homosexual relationships were universally condemned for being *para phusin* (unnatural). Such a view was also prevalent in certain Hellenistic philosophical traditions, notably the Stoic. But we need to know what exactly they meant by 'unnatural' and why such activities were so considered. Bridger begins such an exploration but does not do it justice.

It is certainly true that a 'revisionist' translation of *phusis* (nature) as merely 'culture', 'convention', or 'human moral reflection'[14] is unacceptable. The literature on *phusis* is mounting up to a considerable volume; a recent entry into the field is De Young's article of 1988, arguing a similar line to Bridger.[15] However the debate should not revolve around finding a right translation for the word *phusis*, but rather should recognise that what we would distinguish, cultural as opposed to natural, was not so distinguished by Paul and his contemporaries, and that *phusis* can be used across the board from 'nature' to 'culture' in a way we would find imprecise.

Even if we agree with Hays that:

> In Paul's time the categorization of homosexual practices as *para phusin* [against 'nature'] was a commonplace feature of polemical attacks against such behavior, particularly in the world of Hellenistic Judaism,

there is no obvious justification to make the step he then makes, without at least some qualification:

11 The standard work is K. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (revised edition), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989. Other important studies include M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, Pantheon Books, New York 1985, and *The Care of Self*, Pantheon Books, New York 1986; D. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*, Routledge, New York & London 1990; D. Halperin, J. Winkler & F. Zeitlin (eds), *Before Sexuality*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990; J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*, Routledge, New York & London 1990.

12 See for instance: R. MacMullen, 'Roman Attitudes to Greek Love' in *Historia* 31 (1982), pp 484-502. Also J. Hallett, 'Roman Attitudes to Sex' pp 1265-1278 in M. Grant and R. Kitzinger (eds), *Civilisations of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (vol. 2), Charles Scribner and Sons, New York 1988.

13 Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar*, chs 2, 22, 49.

14 Bridger refutes such translations which he attributes to Boswell, Scroggs and Williams. op. cit., p 114.

15 J. De Young, 'The Meaning of "Nature" in Romans 1 and its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions against Homosexuality' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31.4 (Dec 1988), pp 429-441.

> Though he offers no explicit reflection on the concept of 'nature' it is clear that in this passage Paul identifies 'nature' with the created order.[16]

The qualification to be made is that we must not assume that Paul's understanding of the 'created order' is necessarily the same as ours, the reason being that Paul does not define culture and nature distinctly. Alternatively we must say that it is not clear that 'nature' should be identified with the 'created order'.

Before leaving the ancient world it is important to consider the place of procreation in those societies. A recent study by William Countryman argues that sexual activities were understood by Jewish thinkers of the time to be natural or unnatural, primarily in terms of whether or not the acts were procreative or potentially so.[17] Writing from a Jewish perspective, and in the light of Jewish scholarship, Rabbi Kahn considers that the Levitical prohibitions of male homosexual acts (Lev. 18:10; 20:13) stem from the non-procreativity of such acts.[18] This is challenged by Cohen, also writing from a Jewish background, who believes that the Levitical prohibitions condemn the misuse of semen, the source of life; the prohibitions are particular, and do not condemn homosexual orientation or other homosexual practice, nor female homosexual relations, but occur in a broad section dealing with blood and semen, the two life-substances.[19]

In a separate article, Countryman takes issue with those who claim a 'created order' of heterosexuality from Genesis 2. He asks why these 'creationists', who argue that Genesis sets down created norms, do not adhere equally to the requirement of Sabbath observance. He dismisses selective appropriation of verses, and argues instead that Genesis 2 affirms companionship and sexual intimacy, and does not in any way legislate against homosexual relationships.[20]

When we examine a prohibition we need to know not only what exactly was being condemned but also on what grounds, and when those grounds are not given explicitly, then we must be very careful in evaluating the surrounding context and culture. It is probably somewhat limiting to read the Levitical prohibitions solely as regulating semen, since the setting is also the distinctiveness of Israelite behaviour from surrounding Canaanite cus-

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16 R. Hays, 'A response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol 14 (1986), p 194.

17 L. W. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, SCM, London 1989, ch. 3 and p 114 n 20.

18 Y. H. Kahn, 'Judaism and Homosexuality: The Traditionalist/ Progressive Debate' in R Hasbany (ed), *Homosexuality and Religion*, Harrington Park Press, New York 1989, p 72.

19 M. S. Cohen, 'The Biblical Prohibition of Homosexual Intercourse', *Journal of Homosexuality* Vol 19 (4), 1990, pp 3-20. It should be noted that the NIV translates *zera'* as 'children' (so Lev. 18:21), but the word has a base meaning of 'seed'. Cohen argues that Lev. 18:21 refers to a custom of offering semen (not children) to Molech, and so this (otherwise rather awkward) verse is actually central to the section on the control of life-sources. Given that many of the other prohibitions in the chapter do *not* centre around procreativity (e.g. incest), there are no obvious grounds for giving non-procreativity as the grounds for male homosexual acts to be prohibited.

20 L. W. Countryman, *What does the Bible's Creation Narrative tell us about Homosexuality?*, Integrity, Washington, DC 1992.

tom (Lev 18:3). The background to the Levitical prohibitions is, however, not easy to uncover, and without some understanding of that background we should be careful how we re-use these prohibitions in our own societies.

We turn now to the third broad area where Christians need to tread carefully, the ongoing debate concerning the construction of sexuality.

Sexuality: a modern construct

It is a given that the debate concerning the place and status of homosexuals in society, as well as in the church, is apt to be heated and angry. When passions run high, and the divisions between the two 'sides' have widened, language must be used with great care. To some the issue is one of 'liberation'. Gay rights is a 'liberation struggle'. The fact that others deny the validity of the liberation sought only heightens the conflict. Oppressors usually deny the validity of the arguments used by the oppressed. 'Homosexual', 'homophobic', 'gay' are all emotive words. Do we guard our tongues against careless words?

The word 'homosexual' has only a brief history. It was coined at the end of the last century for a purpose. 'Homosexuality' predates 'heterosexuality' by a few years: The words were coined because scientists wanted a 'neutral' word to use when studying sexual behaviour.[21] To say a person is homosexual, and to think that that sums up his or her identity, is like saying we have described a person if we say she or he is left-handed. We have described but one facet of them. We have not even described with any completeness their sexuality; we have distinguished one aspect of it, without touching on whether that person is promiscuous or celibate, whether sensitive, compassionate, carnal or with a high sexual drive. It is a clinical word which describes a person primarily by their sexual orientation; it is noteworthy that those who are heterosexual do not see that to be the most important aspect of who they are, yet so often a person is labelled 'homosexual' as if that is a sufficient label.

The word 'gay' is much preferred by gay people and has a longer and less precise history. Many women who are attracted to their own sex prefer 'lesbian', despite its often sneering tone from others. Language is important: it reveals our priorities; it is also problematic since there is no agreed use. In a context where passion runs high it is crucial that we try and be as careful as possible with language. I would challenge whether, as Christians, we should see sexual orientation as the primary judge of people. Can we really lump celibate homosexuals with the most promiscuous? We do not condemn all heterosexual acts and people because of the promiscuous excesses of a few.

What is absolutely certain is that the Bible never condemns *people* who are homosexually oriented. In a few passages it mentions (and many would

21 See Halperin, op. cit., pp 15-18. Dynes and Johansson trace the word 'homosexual', in its German form, back to a pamphlet written anonymously in 1869, opposing the extension of a Prussian anti-sodomy law to the whole of the North German confederation. The term was popularised by a zoologist, Jaeger, in 1880. See the article on 'Homosexual' in W. Dynes ed., *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality'*, Garland Press, New York 1990, p 555.

argue it condemns) homosexual *acts*. The casual use of 'homosexual' by so many who should know better has inflamed a homophobia, which makes 'gays' the modern equivalent of the 'witches' of an earlier age, less than human, and so objects of hatred and derision.[22]

Not only must we be more aware of language, we must also evaluate how culturally constructed issues of gender are. The mechanics of sexual activity probably do not vary enormously the world over, but the part sex plays in a culture, and the meaning invested in particular behaviour does vary. The writings of Foucault in particular have opened up new realisations of the construction of 'gender'. We have seen how sexual activity was understood in the Hellenistic world through a lens of 'status'; mutuality was subordinate to maintaining right status. Linked to this is of course a hierarchical view of humanity, in which women are subordinate and weaker and less rational than men. Words like 'male' and 'female' refer to a biological essence, but 'masculine' and 'feminine' are culturally dependent. What I consider 'feminine' in my setting may not be so considered by another. Too often Christian writers refer to 'masculine' or 'feminine' attributes uncritically, as if a normative understanding of gender is unproblematic.

The word 'homosexual' is a cultural construct; developed for a particular culture. It is not a word which has an equivalent in Greek, because the primary distinction was not between heterosexual and homosexual orientation, but between the one who was active and penetrating and the one who was passive and penetrated; women because they are physiologically made to be penetrated and find pleasure in penetration were therefore automatically shown to be inferior, in a hierarchy of orders. For the Jew of course the woman was periodically unclean and so, among other things, could not perform priestly functions. We need to ask what overall effect the belief that women were unclean every month must have had on the wider issue of human equality.

There is thus a need for the Christian debate to take stock of the scientific, classical and sociological knowledge and theories currently being published. These 'humanistic social sciences' are not to be distrusted any more than we distrust philosophy, or linguistics. All these 'sciences' should help us to develop a more 'Christian' view.

The issues revisited: the problematic of particular worldviews

Bridger seeks to reduce the debate concerning a Christian understanding of 'homosexuality' to two camps, 'traditional' (reckoning homosexual behaviour is 'intrinsically sinful'), and 'revisionist' (holding that 'homosexual behaviour which is loving, committed and stable is acceptable').[23] Such an opening gambit groups together a very wide range of opinions which are not traditional; revisionists are certainly not all of a piece.

22 'Homophobia' and 'homophobic' are words which also need careful use. Homophobia does not signify a 'phobia' but a prejudice; it is more akin to 'racism' and 'sexism', rather than an irrational fear like claustrophobia or arachnophobia. Empirical research into homophobia is 'sparse' (see article on 'Homophobia' by Herek in Dynes, ed., op. cit., p 553). The subject is tackled by J. Dollimore in *Sexual Dissidence*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991.

23 Bridger, op. cit., p 111.

Bridger also claims that a revisionist position demands a new way of doing theology, including a 'repudiation of a natural or created moral order', a 'switch from an objective to a subjective morality', a 'shift in the centre of theology... away from God to humankind', and a destruction of the symbolism of 'differentiation-in-unity of the holy Trinity'.[24] Many of these are only touched on, and cannot be tackled properly here.

However they cannot go unchallenged. Because Bridger does not recognise the ambiguity in Hellenistic thought of 'culture' and 'nature', he fails to recognise precisely the world-view in which Paul operates. He is correct in saying of the meaning of *para phusin*, 'that when Paul uses such language he is reflecting a world-view which was resolutely opposed to homosexuality and that his readers would have understood him to be echoing it.'[25] But it is precisely the fact that he was writing within that world-view which makes the interpretation for today so problematic. (And there *were* those in Paul's time who held to a modified world-view, in which the 'active' male partner in a homosexual relationship was not behaving badly.) In fact Paul is bridging two cultures and world-views, the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman, and his use of *phusis* confirms this. *Phusis* is a Greek concept; the word is not found in the Gospels. It is a word of Hellenistic Judaism, merging two cultures. The exact meaning invested in the word is hard to determine, and even if we can be sure exactly how Paul does use the word, should we accept uncritically the world-view and the particular view of Paul, given the hierarchical and unequal understanding of sexual relations and society?[26] How much is Paul a child of his cultural matrix, and how often does he rise above it to challenge and reinterpret? This is an exceedingly difficult yet crucial question to tackle, if we seek a responsible hermeneutic.

The problematic nature of 'world-view' can be highlighted by looking at a 'traditionalist' response to a 'revisionist' book. Scroggs argues that Paul only condemns pederasty, since that was all Paul knew about.[27] He concludes his book therefore as follows:

> The fact remains, however, that the basic model in today's Christian homosexual community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament that the criterion of reasonable similarity is not met. The conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: *Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate.*[28]

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24 Ibid., pp 118-123.

25 Ibid., p 117.

26 Rosemary Radford Ruether discusses the culture of 'male domination' over both 'nature' and women in chapter 3 of *Sexism and God-Talk*, SCM, London 1992. She postulates a 'universal devaluation of women based on a cultural assumption of the hierarchy of culture... over nature.... Women are symbolized as 'closer to nature' than men and thus fall in an intermediate position between culture as the male sphere and uncontrolled nature'. (p 72) While positing (but not herself requiring) a universal devaluation, which would be challenged by a constructionist view of gender, she specifically considers the Greek and Hebrew cultures and the male position of dominance as an understanding of maleness.

27 Scroggs, op cit., p 121.

28 Ibid., p 127.

De Young takes a traditional line in refuting Scroggs, claiming that moral and ethical statements on sexual matters are universal, because human nature does not change.

> Scroggs' position suggests that the model of adult mutuality was unknown or little known in ancient times. *Yet if it exists now, it certainly existed then. Man's nature has not changed....* [29]

Neither writer, however, has dealt with the root of the matter. Scroggs is wrong to say that pederasty is all that Paul has in mind; after all Paul also condemns female homosexual acts (Rom. 1:26),[30] which were clearly not pederastic. Paul is opposing same-sex acts, not only pederastic unions. However, De Young fails to see that while the 'nature' of 'man' may be argued to remain fairly constant, the way that the 'nature' is expressed and how it is interpreted, is dependent on cultural factors. Mutuality in sexual relations was not a controlling factor; this does not mean love and affection were missing, but that the social order was understood to require that men were the dominant, superior partners. Sexual relations were ordered within this social hierarchy.

Given this hierarchical understanding, both male and female homosexual relations contradicted the norm ('nature') since in Stoic and in Jewish eyes they required a man to be 'passive', or a woman to be 'active'. Female homosexual acts also threatened the male 'right' of dominance. Brooten shows that in Paul's time 'disapproval of lesbians and disapproval of nonpassive heterosexual women are not unrelated to each other ...'.[31]

Current thinking generally considers homosexual orientation to be 'natural', physiologically present in a person. Sexual relations should be between equals and with the consent of both persons; women are not unclean, and can do most jobs without restriction. Our world is very different from Paul's. Paul condemns same-sex acts in the light of his differentiated and structured view of creation, in which the male and female roles should be distinct, and hierarchical. Is such a world-view normative for Christians today? There are many aspects of Paul's thinking that we no longer accept uncritically; we condemn slavery more forthrightly than he did; we do allow women to teach, and in few churches are women silent and hatted, and in those churches seldom do men lift up holy hands as part of their praying (1 Tim. 2:8). The Queen is Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Mrs Thatcher certainly had authority over men when Prime Minister.

A universalisable sexual ethic?

Bridger would defend the continued upholding of the condemnation of homosexual activity for two reasons. First homosexual acts are not even 'potentially procreative' or 'in principle procreative', and secondly the homosexual act destroys the complex symbolism of the one-flesh image.[32]

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29 De Young, art. cit., p 440 (italics mine).

30 Unless of course Paul has in mind women taking a dominant role in sexual activity.

31 B. Brooten, 'Paul's View on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism', pp 61-87 in C. Atkinson et al, eds, *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Beacon, Boston 1985, p 81 n 2 (cf. p 63).

32 Bridger op. cit., p 121.

Both arguments bring us back to 'nature' and created order.

It is hard to argue that sexual activity for a post-menopausal woman is even potentially procreative. It is hard to argue that after a vasectomy a man has sex with the potential to procreate; nor is it clear by what 'principle' such acts are procreative.[33] If procreativity is indeed, essential for legitimate sex, then we should acclaim the Catholic Church's stance, and campaign against contraception. From a Catholic standpoint Michael Buckley writes:

> If sexual pleasure and companionship are regarded as equally primary, and if procreation may be legitimately prevented by artificial means, the force of the argument against homosexual unions where there is genuine affection is enormously weakened.[34]

Buckley is opposed to homosexual unions, but he is at least honest to admit that if procreation is legitimately preventable, and if intimacy is central to sexual relations, then one cannot condemn homosexual unions as illegitimate on such grounds. Rabbi Kahn argues similarly against liberal Jewish thinkers who permit non-procreative sexual acts between heterosexuals, but deny the validity of homosexual acts. 'It is not the non-procreative aspect of homosexual sex that is being objected to, but *being* homosexual.'[35]

To object to homosexual acts because they destroy the symbol of one-flesh unity-in-differentiation seems a very 'Pharisaical' approach. Symbols were given for humanity, humanity is not made to conform to symbols. The potency of symbols can wax and wane; we continue to call Jesus the 'Lamb of God', despite the fact that 'lamb' to most city-dwellers means a cut of meat, and the sacrificial origin of the image is quite foreign.

Bridger, however, elaborates his argument not referring to symbol so much as 'essence'; he argues that the man-woman differentiation is at the heart of creation and is essential to the I-Thou relation which distinguishes our humanity. It is clear that Genesis 1 and 2 do make the man-woman distinction fundamental in creation, but homosexual orientation does not (*pace* Bridger) cut across this distinction. Indeed it affirms the distinction, in as much as a 'homosexual', like a 'heterosexual', does distinguish the sex of his or her partner/object of attraction; it is the necessity of a heterosexual union for complementarity which is challenged by homosexuals. Only if procreativity is brought back as central, can Genesis 1 and 2 be used to prohibit homosexual unions and then contraception, and post-menopausal sex must be outlawed as well. Intimacy and companionship do not require sex-differentiation.

Nevertheless I believe that the intention of the writer of Genesis, and of

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33 'The crucial issue is whether a man and woman are prepared to accept the responsibility of procreation in principle.' (Bridger op. cit., p 121). This sentence should read: 'The crucial issue is whether *a couple* are prepared to accept...'. 'In principle' seems to require a heterosexual union according to Bridger, but then he has not accepted the possibility of same-sex unions in the first place. The phrase 'in principle' adds nothing to the debate except obfuscation.

34 M. Buckley, *Morality and the Homosexual*, Sands & Co, 1959, quoted by Blamires, in M. Macourt, ed., *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*, SCM, London 1977, p 11.

35 Kahn, art. cit., p 73.

other Bible writers, was to stress the complementarity of man and woman, the intertwining of intimacy and procreativity. It does require the sperm of a man and the egg of a woman for procreation. Genesis, Leviticus and Romans all work with a heterosexual norm. The challenge, as I understand it, is not to revise the exegesis, but to recognise the particularity of the world-view and the challenges brought by modern science, which points to sexual orientation being given as much as psycho-socially developed. Again to make things clear, this is not to say that everyone who has homosexual intercourse is acting from a deep recognition of sexual orientation; it is to say that many gay people are gay by nature and from birth. It is these people who are confronted by a world-view which denies what to them is self-evident, the naturalness of their feelings.

The language of symbol is not helpful to the discussion. To claim that sexual union is a symbol of wholeness, is to deny wholeness to the celibate and to the single, whether unmarried, separated or widowed. Sexual intercourse does not need to be heterosexual in order to 'symbolise' the unity of two separate people.

The crux of the matter is that what Paul unqualifiably terms 'unnatural', science shows to be, in all probability in many cases, 'natural'.

Some would deny the validity of such scientific research; others would deny any authority to Paul. It must be obvious that any debate on homosexual behaviour is necessarily only a part of the bigger debate on sexuality and gender. It is a part of the bigger question: 'What does it mean to be a man or a woman, and what are the distinctives of each?' Traditionally the roles of each have been kept separate, in the social and sexual realm. Men and women have been defined in contradistinction to each other. The recent compendium edited by Piper and Grudem, arguing for a created order with male headship, recognises the link between the debate on homosexuality and the feminist challenge to male headship and created orders.[36] The challenge to the created order of man over woman, and to the distinctive role and relative position of man and woman, is viewed as the thin end of the wedge leading to an affirmation of the validity of homosexual unions. To allow equality for women will let in the 'homosexuals'.

How does an evangelical develop a Christian view of gender and sexuality, taking due heed of the complexity of cultural constructs and yet affirming the place of Scripture? Despite attempts to explain away apparent criticism (by Boswell and Countryman among others), it seems clear that Paul does condemn homosexual acts in Romans 1, but he does so from a particular understanding of sexuality which we today do not fully agree with. When we try to look for the background to the Jewish prohibitions of homosexual acts, we find only male homosexual acts legislated against in the Old Testament, and for reasons that are not clear (although the Jewish tradition does oppose homosexual behaviour without exception in the few references we have on the subject).

36 J. Piper and W. Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Crossway Books, Wheaton 1991, p 82f. The argument of most writers takes no account of the cultural construction of gender in the Hellenistic world, and assumes gender issues to be universalisable without problem.

Arguments that claim procreativity ('homosexual acts are not procreative or potentially/in principle procreative') as a support lead one logically to prohibit birth-control; arguments that claim humans are born 'heterosexual', and that homosexuality is a 'perversion' face more and more scientific evidence to the contrary. One way forward has been to see homosexual orientation to be a distortion as a result of the Fall, a reality, but a distortion and imperfection which is a part of fallen creation. Such a line is taken by Helmut Thielicke in his *The Ethics of Sex*.[37] He writes:

> It is true that the homosexual relationship is not a *Christian* form of encounter with our fellow man [sic]; it is nevertheless very certainly a search for the totality of the other *human being*. He who says otherwise has not yet observed the possible depth of a homoerotic-colored friendship.[38]

Thielicke however does not take the route taken by some critics who recognise the reality of the orientation but deny the possibility of acceptable behaviour; he considers celibacy to be a gift given only to some. He therefore argues that the homosexual person whose orientation is abnormal and irreversible, can 'realize his optimal ethical potentialities':

> That such a homoerotic self-realization can take place only among those who are similarly constituted and that, besides, it cannot be an open and public thing, because it falls outside the bounds of the order of creation, hardly needs to be pointed out.[39]

Such a line does however recognise the problem that exists between modern understanding and the traditional view which assumes heterosexual orientation as a given. Even if Thielicke's line is accepted there would need to be much discussion as to what would constitute optimal potentiality, and what behaviour would be unacceptable. Presumably the same standards that exist (in theory) for marriage would be used, that is a 'monogamous', faithful and lasting relationship would be the goal, and infidelities, promiscuity and the denigration of a partner would be morally unacceptable as in any relationship. Thielicke suggests that a 'public' marriage service is problematic and implies that practising homosexuals should not be in leadership in the Church. Is the Church then condoning in secret what it publicly stands against? There seem to be problems here; almost a 'hush-hush' backdoor admittance. Many gays too would challenge the idea that their ability to love is a fallen distorted thing, and would assert the goodness of love and its God-givenness.

Summary and conclusion

This article has taken issue with that position which finds too quick an answer to a very complex problem; I have suggested that the debate takes us necessarily into domains not normally traversed by theologians and ministers; but if the Church is to have something positive to say, it is vital that its leaders become aware of the wider picture before making statements.

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37 H. Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1964, (ch 4:D).
38 Ibid., p 271.
39 Ibid., p 285.

Paul does oppose homosexual acts, and the Old Testament does prohibit male homosexual acts. The few verses where the subject is mentioned cannot however be uncritically turned into a universal condemnation of homosexuality. Bridger takes issue (rightly) with revisionist exegesis which tries to read out the condemnation in Romans 1:26-27. However he fails to construct an adequate hermeneutic, because he does not do justice to the two contexts and cultures, his own and Paul's, and the very different cultural constructs — 'nature' and gender — they have/had.

The debate on 'homosexuality' is a part of much larger debates. It is a part of the wider 'gender/sexuality' debate (as discussed above), and it is also dependent on one's hermeneutical key. Is the authority of Scripture undermined if Paul's teaching is declared culturally constrained and so loses its universal and normative ethic? Bridger challenges the priority given to the 'humanistic social sciences'. Theology should centre on God; 'it is only as we understand more of the nature of God and his purposes that we grasp the nature and purpose of human life.'[40] But how are we to understand the nature and purposes of God? The implication is that the Bible is self-evident in its meaning, without the need for the conceptual categories supplied by the disciplines of sociology and psychology. Bridger creates another bipolarity, similar to his 'revisionist'-'traditional' one, in which sociology and psychology are played off against theology. But a theology of society and humanity-in-society necessitates a sociological and psychological understanding. The Bible can be used precritically, or it can be used in dialogue with the best of psychological and sociological insights, just as it must dialogue with other historical sources in the area of historical accuracy.

> The social sciences provide the theologian who wants to carry out a de-ideologizing task with valuable cognitive tools, but tools which, because of their complexity and subtlety, are beyond the grasp of the majority of people.[41]

This is the real area for debate; how to enable 'the majority of people' to read the Bible with some awareness of the 'ideologies' present in interpretations. Bridger implies a non-ideological reading is possible, if the humanistic social sciences are moved out of the centre; this fails to recognise the ideological taint of his own position, and assumes that biblical authors are somehow above ideological particularity.

The debate on homosexuality has become so intense, not just because of the 'homophobia' found in society — the gut response — but because it is a topic where, at first sight at least, the Bible seems clear and straightforward. Thus it becomes a matter which is at the heart of an evangelical faith, the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

If we were faithful in Sabbath observance, committed to every ordinance in the Torah, and obediently followed Paul in all his social teaching (including the submission to every authority, the sharing with those in need, and the speaking to each other with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs — Rom. 13:1-7; Rom. 12:13; Eph. 5:19), then we might justifiably uphold a fundamentalist

40 Bridger art. cit., p 119.

41 J. L. Segundo, 'The Shift within Latin American Theology', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 52, (Sept 1985), p 28.

'biblical' authority. However, we all interpret the Bible through ideological lenses; screening out some things, and highlighting others. Our ideological lens will be to a great extent determined by our cultural and societal position.

This article has attempted to open up the debate by raising questions, not just concerning the actual meaning of the biblical texts, and particularly Paul's statements in Romans 1, but also concerning our Christian understanding of sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, in the light of wider knowledge. If increased knowledge leads us to a new understanding of Scripture, we must face that, and those who are in positions of leadership and teaching must find ways of opening up the findings of the social sciences to enable 'ordinary' (the great majority of) people to reach informed decisions as well.

The debate on 'homosexuality' will not be quickly resolved, not least because of the challenge to 'biblical revelation' noted above. Meanwhile pastors and other Christians are faced with the practical issues raised by gay people in their communities. Given the complexity of the debate, we should expect a variety of answers; hopefully though, these 'answers' will at least be reached in dialogue with others, and with regard to the complexity of interpreting biblical texts on sexuality, formed and framed in their own particular contexts, in our own, very different contexts.

Peter Reiss is currently a lecturer in the Classics Department at the University of Natal, and also teaches at the Evangelical Bible Seminary of Southern Africa in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. He is an Anglican ordinand from Rochester Diocese due to be ordained in 1995. He has co-authored, with Professor James Cochrane, a report for the Congregational Church of Southern Africa on the subject of sexuality (1992).