

## **Fundamental Scriptural Approaches**

In common with other papers the principal concern of this essay is with the interpretation of the fundamental 'structural' approach to creation expressed in the totality of scripture rather than with individual passages of the bible which may or may not express that fundamental, overarching concern. One such fundamental approach is to contend that the Genesis narrative in particular and scripture as a whole reveals that there is a fundamental differentiation between male and female that is intrinsic to the structure of creation. According to this view men and women fulfil and are fulfilled in the image of God through the complementarity of the different sexes. According to this fundamental concern any sexual relationship that does not express the fundamental differentiation between the sexes, for example, one between persons of the same sex, constitutes a failure to fulfil the image and purpose of God in and for creation. Such a relationship constitutes a privation, a missing of the mark which constitutes sin. The apparent quality of the relationship is irrelevant. No matter how loving the relationship between two people of the same sex might seem there is a fundamental structural privation which means that it will always run contrary to, and therefore fail to fulfil, the image of God.

It is the contention of this essay, however, that the fundamental structural concern expressed in the Genesis narrative is prior to any apparent concern with the differentiation or complementarity of the sexes. The fundamental structural concern of scripture, expressed in the Genesis narrative, is that no inference can be drawn from evil to explain how the world is. The structural concern of the Genesis narrative is twofold. Not with 'how' the world is but 'that' it is, created not out of necessity but as a gift by God. This concern with the 'that' of creation as gift reveals what it is for suffering and the vicissitudes of human life to be designated as evil. This, above all else, distinguishes Israel from the nations. The God who reveals himself to Israel is not just one, he who is, 'I am that I am'<sup>1</sup> but creates ex nihilo. Far from trying to incorporate Pagan, Hellenistic philosophy into Christianity the early Fathers of the Church sought to express and preserve the implications of the fundamental transcendent divide between creator and creation in their articulation of creation as ex nihilo and God as Trinity. Far from being just another existent thing, 'God' is Being itself without which nothing is sustained in being.<sup>2</sup>

Anything which fails to fulfil that being, which seeks not to be, is a privation of Being. Just as the hole in a polo mint is known by being nothing rather than something, by being a hole in something else, so evil is known by being nothingness, non-Being that which does not fulfil Being. As such, part of what constitutes evil as evil is that it is unintelligible and incomprehensible. Why would anything

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1 Exodus 3. 14

seek not to be rather than to be? The fundamental structural concern of the Genesis narrative is that suffering and the vicissitudes of life cannot tell us anything about how the world is to be understood. They should not be used as inferences for the basis of a theory such as Evolution, for example, to state that life is to be understood only in terms of competition for resources and a struggle to survive. They should not be used as inferences as a basis for Theodicy, that they are somehow the necessary instruments by which God fashions us into human beings with free will and for which we are compensated by an after-life.

The fundamental structural concern of the Genesis narrative is with 'that' the world is, created as a gift, rather than 'how' it is. Suffering and the vicissitudes of life chime with our profound sense of alienation that something has gone wrong. God sets before us Death and Life<sup>3</sup>, Being and non-Being which is precisely why, as Christians, we celebrate Christ's victory over death.

To desire God, to choose Being, to choose Life is to desire to be made fit for the life of the Kingdom. In these terms a Christian life is to be understood fundamentally as preparation for the Kingdom. Our lives are to be orientated towards the Kingdom and turned away from all that is incompatible with it. Life in the Kingdom is a social life. We are not being prepared for a solitary life but for a life in God with others. Consequently to be fit to live in the Kingdom is to live with others in a particular way or range of ways. The fundamental standard by which any way of living is to be judged is love of neighbour, the love made manifest in the life of Jesus Christ. Consequently, on this understanding, there is no special Christian ethic of sex, no special rules governing our sexual behaviour that do not also apply to every other aspect of our behaviour. The same ethic of love of neighbour and being made fit for the Kingdom applies as much to our economic relationships, for example, as it does to our sexual relationships<sup>4</sup>. On this understanding it is not differentiation or complementarity itself

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2 For an excellent treatment and presentation of this issue see Janet Soskice, *Naming God: A Study in Faith and Reason*, Chapter 10 in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*.2005. Paul J Griffiths, Reinhard Hütter, eds. T & T Clark Gregory Nazianzus puts it thus, for example, *God always was, and always is, and always will be. Or rather, God always Is. For Was and Will be are fragments of our time, and of changeable nature, but He is Eternal Being. And this is the Name that He gives to Himself when giving the Oracle to Moses in the Mount. For in Himself he sums up and contains all Being, having neither beginning in the past nor end in the future; like some great Sea of Being, limitless and unbounded, transcending all conception of time and nature, only adumbrated by the mind, and that very dimly and scantily...not by his Essentials-* 'On the Theophany, or Birthday of Christ,' Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, vol.7 ch. 7, 346

3 Deuteronomy 30. 19

4 For a fuller treatment of this approach see the first chapter of Moore, Gareth. 1992 *The Body in Context, Sex and Catholicism*. London and New York, Continuum . The influence of *The Body in Context* and *A Question of Truth, Christianity and Homosexuality* by Gareth Moore upon this essay will be evident to anyone familiar with those two books and is hereby acknowledged by the author of this essay.

between men and women that is essential but how it is used or not used to fulfil the love due to our neighbour. Not an impersonal abstract 'other' but another person.

The experience of the lives of gay and lesbian people is that they are not necessarily any more or any less, generous, judgemental, promiscuous, uncharitable, unfaithful and unhelpful in regard to the demands of Christian faith and discipleship than are heterosexuals. The experience of gay and lesbian people who live within permanent, faithful and stable relationships is that they are no less likely to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God than heterosexuals. In short they are no more prone to privations of what Jesus reveals in himself as life in all its fullness, the life of the Kingdom, than are heterosexuals.

There is biblical precedent that such experience can be interpreted as the promptings of the Spirit necessitating a change of interpretation. One such passage was appealed to by Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, in his justification of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and of God as Trinity.

“Our Saviour had some things which he said could not be borne at that time by his disciples”<sup>5</sup>.

The passage to which reference is being made in this instance is John 16. 12-13

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

For the Early Fathers of the Church the principle was clear. The Arians( those who taught that the Son was a created thing) were correct to maintain that there was no explicit statement of God as Trinity within either the Old or New Testaments. Yet the gospel itself explicitly bears witness to the fact that the implicit and essential revelation contained within it is there to be received at the appropriate time through the promptings of the Spirit. Jesus could not tell his disciples plainly that which they were incapable of receiving.

The dispute in this instance of course is as to whether or not SSU's (Same Sex Unions) are indeed such a thing as could not be borne until now. One instance within scripture where this interpretative approach is to be found is that of Acts 15 and the Council of Jerusalem. Against the demand of the Law of Moses that Gentiles be circumcised is set the experience of the Holy Spirit that there is no difference between Gentile and Jew through their faith in the grace and lordship of Christ. On the grounds of that experience an appeal is made to a wider scriptural witness and a reinterpretation and

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**5 Gregory of Nazianzus, St.**,in, *A Select Library of The Christian Church, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7,Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzus*, eds P. Schaff and H. Wace, Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1894, reprinted by Hendrickson Publishers 1995.:”, “ The Fifth theological Oration. On the Holy Spirit.” XXVII.

change is made. Within Acts 15 James claims that this change is the fulfilment of the witness of the prophets. It could be maintained that there is no such witness pertaining to SSU's and that Acts 15 and circumcision becomes a special isolated case. However if one takes Jesus and the Kingdom which he proclaimed as the fulfilment of the witness of the prophets then a coherent case can still be made that the blessing of SSU's would go with rather than against the grain of scripture on the grounds that a change implicit in and consistent with the scriptural witness could not be borne until the appropriate time.

This fundamental approach of judging whether or not something is a privation of Love, Being and the demands of the Kingdom in order to discern whether or not now is the appropriate time to affirm something which previously could not be accepted can then be applied as the underlying premise for approaching individual scriptural passages that are used as the basis for points of argument in the debate concerning Same Sex Relationships<sup>6</sup>. What follows below is a summary of the sort of interpretation that is made of such texts in order to consider them as compatible with and not contrary to an acceptance of permanent, faithful, stable and loving same sex relationships by the Church<sup>7</sup>.

### **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13**

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

These passages have nothing to do with the demands of love and the fulfilment of the Kingdom. The distinction between male and female that they represent is not one founded upon a notion of equal but different essential to creation but of power and male superiority and female inferiority. One context in which this Holiness Code in Leviticus is to be understood is that of defining Israel as set apart and holy to the Lord as compared to the surrounding nations. The other context is internal to Israel itself and preserving the status of the dominant social group. If one person in a dominant social group

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<sup>6</sup> The most cited Scriptural references are Genesis 1, Genesis 2, Genesis 19:1-11, Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The Genesis material has already been considered in general terms above.

<sup>7</sup> Good examples of accessible publications that deal with this material in terms of endorsing SSU's are, John, Jeffrey 1993 *Permanent, Faithful, Stable' Christian Same-Sex Partnerships*. London, Affirming Catholicism and Moore, Gareth 2001 *The Body in Context, Sex and Catholicism*. London, Continuum and 2003 *A Question of Truth, Christianity and Homosexuality* London, Continuum. Examples of the case against would include Gagnon, Robert A J. 2001 *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* Nashville:Abingdon and Nolland, Lisa 2008 Chris Sugden & Sarah Finch eds., *God, Gays and the Church: Human Sexuality and Experience in Christian Thinking* London: Latimer Trust. A useful textbook is, Cornwall, Susannah 2013 *Theology And Sexuality*. London, SCM Press.

demeans them self by acting contrary to the norms acceptable to that group then all others in that dominant social group are demeaned by association. If the levitical law were founded upon a differentiation of male and female as different but equal there would be an equivalent concern with homosexual acts between women, with homosexual acts as such. The fact that there is no levitical prohibition against homosexual acts between women reveals that the fundamental concern is not with homosexual acts per se but with preserving the identity and status of the dominant social group, that is men. If the concern was with homosexual acts as such there would be an equivalent ban on such activity between women.

### **Genesis 19**

This dynamic can also be seen to be at work in the story of Sodom in Genesis 19. The men of Sodom seek to demean Lot's guests by subjecting them to a sexual assault. Lot offers his daughters as substitutes rather than his sons not out of a concern with homosexuality but for social norms and the demands of hospitality. It will be less demeaning for his daughters to be raped than his guests and less demeaning for his daughters to be raped than his sons. In any case this is clearly not an instance that is concerned with the love that is due from us to each other in the fulfilment of the demands of the Kingdom. One would not want to offer a context in which rather than offering oneself to save another from injustice one offers another as an example of the sort of behaviour that fulfils the demands of the Kingdom.

### **Romans 1. 18-32**

Unlike Leviticus, Paul does seem to treat men and women equally with regard to same-sex activity in his letter to the Romans. He does not, however, appear to be primarily engaged in an attack upon people who engage in same- sex activity but Gentiles. Paul presents such activity not so much as a sin deserving of punishment but as a condition in which Gentiles have been placed by God for suppressing the truth about him. If anything it is presented more as an acceptable punishment for a crime than as a sin. Another point of note in this passage is that in verse 26 Paul refers to such passions as shameful rather than sinful. Shameful things are not to be done and sin is not to be done but it does not therefore follow that that which is shameful and that which is sinful are one and the same. As Gareth Moore observes,<sup>8</sup> gluttony is dangerous to health and under-eating is dangerous to health but it does not follow that gluttony and under-eating are one and the same. Rather they share a common property, that of being dangerous to health. Similarly the shameful and the sinful have a common property, that they are both to be avoided. They may, however, need to be avoided for different reasons. That which is shameful may not be to be avoided because it is sinful. Another issue in relation to this particular passage regards the sense in which Paul uses nature in verses 26 and 27.

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<sup>8</sup> *A Question of Truth* p90

In 1 Cor. 11. 14, for example, Paul writes, “Does not nature herself teach you that while long hair disgraces a man” (REB). Yet it is not at all clear that long hair does disgrace a man and Christianity certainly does not regard it as sinful. What then does Paul mean when he claims that same sex activity is unnatural? Does he mean it in the same sense in which nature reveals that long hair disgraces a man? Are we to assume then that in order to avoid being sinful human conduct must be according to nature? That brings us to the contested territory of Natural Law rather than just the contested territory of scriptural revelation. Natural Law is not simply concerned with what just happens to be the case in creation but is concerned with the grounds upon which one makes judgements concerning what happens to be the case. One such criterion would be whether or not any given thing under consideration fulfilled or failed to fulfil the love of God. If one can find no evidence that same-sex relations inherently compromise the capacity of those engaged in such relationships to love their neighbour and bear witness to the Kingdom any more than heterosexual ones do then one has grounds to believe that they are not contrary to nature in the sense of Natural Law. In this passage Paul is explicitly concerned with those who have made no attempt to seek God. How does this passage apply to men and women who make every effort to seek the grace of God in order to live a life of christian discipleship and yet, in sincere conscience, cannot discern that their love for someone of the same sex runs contrary to the demands of such discipleship? What if, on the contrary, such couples find that their relationship enables them to fulfil the demands of the Kingdom more readily than would otherwise be the case? If one were to use this passage from Romans to assert that the fact that such couples are having homosexual sex means that they have not apprehended God why would that not also be asserted of christians who charge interest on loans; do not sell their possessions, give all to the poor and hold all in common; who are gluttonous, proud or indulge any other aspect of human behaviour deemed not to fulfil the demands of the Kingdom?

### **1 Cor. 6:9-10**

This passage is also sometimes cited as a rejection of SSU's.

“Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor ‘malakoi’, nor ‘arsenokoitai’, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

The difficulty of knowing the exact meaning of either *malakoi* or *arsenokoitai* and linking them to a specific form of sexual behaviour is illustrated by the fact that both terms are translated as ‘sexual perverts’ in, for example, both the Revised Standard Version and Revised English Bible translations of the text.

*Malakoi* literally means ‘soft’. The use of the masculine form of the word in this instance suggests a direct reference to males and its use is clearly intended to be pejorative. It probably indicates some

sort of designation of men behaving in a way understood only to be proper to women at the time. But critical scholars have been unable to come to a consensus as to what exactly *malakoi* are or to link them to some form of specific sexual behaviour. The term could represent a disapproval of homosexual behaviour because it makes men soft and compromises rigid gender distinctions of the time. If that were to be the case then the term would not represent distaste for homosexual acts as such but rather a concern for a vision of what it is to be a male and to have masculine qualities that is particular to the time. Such an interpretation would also explain why there is no apparent inclusion of female homosexuals in the list.

*Arsenokoites* is a word which appears to have no established use in Paul's period and appears to have been coined by Paul himself probably inspired by Leviticus 18:22. One attempt to gain an understanding of the way in which the term might be being used by Paul is through an interpretation of a leading scholar of Hellenistic Judaism of the time called Philo. Philo comments specifically on Leviticus 18:22 in his *The Special Laws* (III. 37-39). Philo seems to interpret the text principally in terms of a rejection of a pederastic relationship common to the Hellenistic context of his day in which a younger male becomes the passive sexual partner of an older one. The principal objections are to the feminising of the males concerned and to the sterility of the relationship. Such concerns and the context, however, clearly do not fit with the context with which we are concerned, that of a permanent, faithful, stable and loving relationship between consenting equals. Another observation that can be made in relation to context is the context in which this text appears in the first letter to the Corinthians itself. The context is one in which Paul reprimands the Corinthian Christians for engaging in lawsuits against one another. The principal subject of Paul's objections are unjust practices that do harm to others. Such a reading would interpret Paul's use of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* as part of a context in which the concern was not with homosexual practices as such but with practices that were unloving or harmful. This again is not the context of the homosexual relationships with which we are concerned, specifically those between committed Christians. Their relationships are not part of a life synonymous with idolatry, greed, extortion or robbery, for example. As Gareth Moore puts it,

“If for Paul it was natural to lump all these ways of living together, we do not do so, and we cannot do so without doing violence to what we actually know to be the case. We have to say once more either that, as I have suggested, Paul is talking about very specific sexual practices important in the culture of his day, or that he did not envisage the possibility that people in homosexual relationships be not Godless, a possibility which we know to be realized in our society”<sup>9</sup>.

## **1 Timothy 1:10**

In this instance the consensus of translation between the New English Bible and the Revised Standard Version breaks down. The NEB translates the use of *arsenokoitai* in this instance as *perverts* whereas the RSV opts for *sodomites*.

The list in verse 10 is devised by Paul as a list of the sort of people against whom the law is intended. Despite the disparity in translation in this instance between the NEB and the RSV for example, everything stated in relation to the use of the term in 1 Cor. 6:9-10 above still applies to its use in 1 Timothy. To interpret the use of *arsenokoitai* in this instance as a condemnation of permanent, faithful, stable and loving SSU's as they are understood in our context is unwarranted. First, if one does chose to translate the term here as 'sodomite' then that of course involves no reference to female homosexuality. Nor does the term make any specific reference to homosexual relationships as such, it is not unknown for heterosexual males to indulge in anal intercourse with women, for example. The term 'sodomy' may also not apply to any aspect of the sexual activity engaged in by a male homosexual couple within the context of a permanent, faithful, stable and loving relationship. Hence to use this text as a conclusive condemnation of what is envisaged as Same Sex Marriage or some sort of covenanted same sex relationship is clearly unwarranted.

The fundamental interpretive stance adopted in this essay is that the fundamental standard by which any way of living is to be judged is love of neighbour, the love made manifest in the life of Jesus Christ, a way of living that amounts to the fulfilment of the Kingdom. It is the contention of this essay that the context of a permanent, faithful, stable and loving homosexual relationships, particularly, though not exclusively, between christians is not a context to which it is warranted to apply the texts considered above. Such texts are speaking to and concerned with a very different context. Rather, when considering the totality of the scriptural witness there are sufficient grounds to warrant a recognition of a permanent, faithful, stable and loving same sex relationship as a way of life capable of being perfected and transformed by the riches of God's grace to fulfil the demands of the Kingdom.

*Matthew Hill 22.i.2014*