

Blessed Lord
who caused all holy scriptures to be written
for our learning:
Help us to hear them,
to read mark learn and inwardly digest them
that through patience and the comfort
of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour
Jesus Christ.

Book of Common Prayer

SAME-SEX ISSUES AND THE BIBLE

5 BIBLE STUDIES

TO SUPPORT THE CHURCH'S

DISCERNMENT PROCESS

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and David Compton

Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland 2015

Same-Sex Issues and the Bible
2015 Bible Study Series
The fifth Bible study resource offered by BACI

Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland
<www.bibliahibernica.wordpress.com>

For the free uses of the churches

Using these Bible Studies

To all these studies we come as people within a Christian tradition, but we come with our own understandings, questions, and concerns. The wider the variety of different perspectives and life experiences can be brought to each study group the better.

It will be important to pay careful and prayerful attention both to the words we read and to each other's contributions, asking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We will not arrive at a full understanding of God's will in five short sessions. But as we listen carefully to one another and the texts, we can at least hope for a deeper understanding of Scripture. May this opportunity to study these key biblical texts together assist in the wider listening and discernment process now taking place in the Church of Ireland.

The BACI Team

SAME-SEX ISSUES AND THE BIBLE:

CONTENTS

Week 1. The Teaching of Jesus.

Jesus is not recorded as saying anything at all about same-sex relationships in the Gospels or in the New Testament as a whole. This can be interpreted as meaning that the prohibition in Leviticus was so absolutely accepted and obeyed that it was not an issue. Jesus certainly affirms heterosexual marriage; but he also insists that it is 'for this age only' (Matt 22.30, Mk 12.25). For him, friendship and discipleship in common seem to trump family relationships every time - ('whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' Mk.3.35) - though he brings them together on the cross, when he gives his mother into the care of John (Jn.19.26-27). If there is any guide to what Jesus might say to same-sex relationships today, perhaps it is to be found in his words, 'by their fruits you shall know them'(Mt.7.20). Others might suggest, 'Go and sin no more!' (Jn.8.11) Whichever we prefer, we dare not neglect Jesus' constant habit of reaching out to the 'sinners' and 'unclean' marginalised by the society around him and spending his time with them.

Week 2. Leviticus – the prohibitions of Chapters 18 and 20

An absolute prohibition on same-sex activity between males? Or between women as well? Or only between Israelite men? Or only in the conditions of the era when the Jewish people needed to preserve their distinction from the pagan tribes they had dispossessed, and were anxious to increase their population?

How do these verses relate to us today

- if taken literally as instruction for God's people through all time?
- if taken as God's regulations for that particular time and place?

- if taken as needing further enquiry regarding the personal relationship in question?

Week 3. Genesis 1 and 2 – Implications from the Creation narratives

Human-beings were created 'male and female in God's image. (Gen 1). In more detail (Gen.2.) Eve was created as a 'helper' for Adam from his side, and the two 'become one flesh'. Both passages can be said to imply the need of male and female for each other to complete the 'image of God' in human relationship. From another point of view, sexuality can be seen not so much as 'either male or female' but as a continuum between the macho and the very feminine. Perhaps committed human *relationship* as such is what discloses God's nature, in so far as it mirrors his love, support and creativity? No type of personal relationship other than 'marriage' is suggested in Gen 1 and 2; but can this mean that no other relationship, in families, in friendship, in community is acceptable to God? What about God's 'It is not good for man to be alone', and his desire to find a partner for Adam who delights his heart? Does the typical necessarily rule out the a-typical?

4. Romans 1.18- 32 – Paul's teaching on unnatural and depraved sexual activity

This is the text most cited by those who urge the unacceptability of same-sex intercourse under any circumstances. At first reading, it seems clear that all same-sex passion is roundly condemned; on closer inspection we realise that the debased type of homosexual activity Paul describes is seen as a *punishment* from God for the root sin of idolatry. Beyond that, the question for us here is whether Paul is referring to *all* same-sex activity or only the lustful, shaming, exploitative behaviour which all of us would equally reject, for people of either sexual orientation. In the light of recent research on sexuality, and by the yardstick of 'by their fruits you shall know them', we might consider that faithful, monogamous same-sex partnerships providing the stable and loving relationship appropriate for those of same-sex

orientation, are not Paul's target, and that the modern phenomenon of such partnerships was not under consideration. Or we might not. It is helpful to find out more about sexual mores of Paul's world to discuss these issues productively.

Week 5. 1 Cor.6.9-11. & Acts 10-11. Sin lists, condemnation and redemption

Both the first two passages feature 'sin-lists' which were typical of both the Christian / Jewish and the Hellenistic world of the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E., such as was also included in last week's passage from Romans. It is interesting that the specific sins associated with homosexual (or to a lesser extent irresponsible heterosexual) behaviour are the ones most frequently singled out for emphasis on likely eternal punishment. We don't worry so much about 'the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers', or about 'slave-traders, liars and perjurers'. There are two Greek terms, '*arsenokoites*' (literally 'lying with men') and '*malakoi*' (lit. 'soft ones') in these passages which are so rare that there is some debate about their exact meaning. Do they refer specifically to pederasty and lustful, irresponsible behaviour? Or to *any* sexual exchange between individuals of the same gender, however loving, faithful and mutually committed? Faithful Christians do not agree on the answer.

Once again, the root question for us today is, 'What is the Spirit saying to the Church *today* through these passages?' It may be helpful to look back to Study 1 in this connection, and to reflect on Paul's experience of the society of his day. Is it possible that we are heading for a shift of understanding comparable to that described in Acts 10, when the dramatic action of the Holy Spirit in the centurion Cornelius and his household led to the opening of the Church to the formerly 'unclean' and unacceptable Gentiles?

STUDY ONE – Introduction: The Way of Jesus.

For our first Lent 2015 Bible study, we look not at sexuality as such but at Jesus' teaching and practice in relation to the Jewish law – the Torah.

If we recognise Jesus as the Son of God, who embodies his Father's will and love for all creation, his teaching about the Law will be crucial for the way we interpret the Old Testament texts in our studies, and also the Law-related aspects of our New Testament texts.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is concerned to expound the Jewish Law in a way which deepens its challenge, taking it beyond the regulations emphasised by the Jewish teachers of his time to underline the spirit of life-giving and respectful service to others which animated its commands. As one scholar has put it, Jesus' demand is for 'a radical gift of self to God and neighbour in both inner thought and outward action', thus exceeding the 'righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees'.*

It has been remarked that Christian ethics has too often emphasised Jesus' commands more than his example. So the last passage in today's selection shows Jesus controversial practice of welcoming all comers into his company, without reference to the traditional 'purity' regulations which limited social relationships in the Jewish society of his day.

It is well known that daily life in 1st century Palestine was governed both by Jewish religious law and Roman imperial law, also that there was habitual conflict between Jewish custom and the norms of Greek culture from the time of Alexander the Great's invasion of 330 B.C. It is helpful to bear this in mind when studying our texts, and to remember that Jesus saw himself as 'fulfilling the Law and the Prophets' of the Jewish tradition by deepening their challenge, thus showing the way to the perfection of God's kingdom.

*John P Meier, author of *The Vision of Matthew*, New York 1979, and *Matthew* in the New Testament Message series, Veritas, 1980.

Matthew 5

The Law and the Prophets, Love, Judging & Fruitfulness

¹⁷ Jesus said, ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. . .

⁴³ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 7. Judging Others

¹‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? . . . ¹²‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 7. A Tree and Its Fruit

¹⁵ ‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶**You will know them by their fruits.** Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Matthew 9. Jesus’ example of inclusive love.

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ ¹²But when he heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

A traditionalist reading

Mt.5.v.18. ‘Until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter of the law will pass from the law until all is accomplished’. The exact implication is not entirely clear, but it shows that Jesus took the Law seriously and we must do the same, even though over time the Church has dispensed with Old Testament ritual and purity laws that are no longer deemed appropriate.

v.19 warns Christian teachers to continue to insist on even the ‘least’ items of the Jewish law, ‘until all is accomplished’.

v.43. Loving our enemies does not mean condoning their sins. Our prayer for them is that they will repent and become righteous

Mt.7.v.1. It is God who judges, according to his Law. And yes, we must take care not to fall into sin ourselves. If we are not aware of what is sinful, we may do just that!

v.12 begs the question of what we want others to do to us. We may be grateful for correction and warning!

vv.15–20, on knowing a tree by its fruits, imply that we are called to celebrate the fruit of each other’s lives. But with reference to same-sex relationships, whatever ‘fruit’ they may offer will be marred by the scandal offered with it.

Mt.9.vv.9-13. While it is true that Jesus called a despised tax-collector as a disciple, and then challenged the Jewish purity laws by eating with him and his friends, he still defines them as ‘sinners’ he had come to ‘call’. In the same way, we may spend time with sinners but still call them to repent.

Another reading.

Mt.5.v.17. Jesus comes to *fulfil* the law and the prophets. This means bringing understanding of the law to perfection, in line with the challenge of the prophets of Ancient Israel.

v.18 ‘Until all is accomplished’ refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection, which Matthew sees as the apocalyptic event which overturns the old order and opens the Kingdom of God to ‘all nations’. (cf. Matt 28.19) This is the time of accomplishment until which ‘not one letter of the law will pass away’.

v.19 is modified by v. 20. Christian righteousness must *exceed* that of the Pharisees, interpreting the law as deepened by Jesus in the verses which follow – (known as “the antitheses” each one taking the letter of the Hebrew law to a deeper level.)

v.43. This version of the love command defines Jesus’ own practice. We too are called to be ‘perfect’ in reflecting God’s love as Jesus did.

Mt. 7.1. Loving others implies not judging them, being aware that we all fail to be perfect.

v.12 reminds us that ‘the law and the prophets’, which Jesus came to fulfil, require this restraint of us. We should offer encouragement in all that is good, not criticism of what we see as wrong. We might be wrong!

vv.15–20 warn us that it is the *fruit* of people’s lives and relationships which shows the quality of their obedience to God’s will. We need to be wary of false prophets whose lives do not show forth the *shalom* of God’s living presence.

Mt.9.vv.9-13. This passage shows Jesus’ acceptance of those marginalised by Jewish norms. He calls us to reach out to those our Church has marginalised, and to consider that making an outcast of any human being is un-Christian.

SOME QUESTIONS

How might we distinguish between the Old Testament laws which should still apply for us today (for instance the Ten Commandments) and those which do not?

What does 'not judging' others mean in practice? Why do we sometimes find it difficult? What about 'taking the log out of our own eye'?

What does Jesus' command to love our 'enemies' – those we might find threatening - mean for us today? Who are these people? How might reconciliation be achieved?

Might it turn out that those we think of as 'enemies' actually 'bear good fruit'? Might we sometimes 'bear bad fruit'? What does good and bad fruit in human life consist of?

Jesus scandalised the Pharisees by 'eating with tax-collectors and sinners', (also by healing the sick and allowing his disciples to pluck ears of corn on the Sabbath). Are we too easily scandalised or afraid of 'scandal'? When might causing scandal today be a good thing? When might it not be?

STUDY 2. Old Testament Prohibition of Male – Male intercourse

The classic Old Testament texts referring to same-sex intercourse are both found within what scholars have defined as ‘The Holiness Code’ in the third part of the Book Leviticus (ch.17–26). Leviticus was probably compiled from earlier material by priestly writers around the time the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon. Much of it is concerned with Israel’s temple ritual and warns against contamination by the customs and cults of the Canaanites they had displaced in the land.

The requirement of holiness and purity, understood as being ‘set apart’ for God, probably arose initially in relation to the people’s approach to God, but gained strength in the early days of the conquest of the Promised Land. The Fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of most of its inhabitants in Babylon was interpreted as God’s punishment for disobedience, with the result that the purity regulations were given renewed emphasis.

Whether the prohibition on male-male sexual encounters is to be viewed as a moral injunction or as ‘purity’ regulation on a par with the prohibition on sowing different crops in the same field, or with the ritual contamination of bodily fluids, is one issue at stake as we seek to interpret the texts and ask ourselves what God is saying to us through them today. The command comes between some verses forbidding sexual relationships with members of one’s own family and others prohibiting bestiality, which we would uphold today; but unlike these verses it has also been seen as referring to male prostitution in the Canaanite fertility rites (which also practiced child sacrifice mentioned in the previous verse) and as underlining the Israelite anxiety about not wasting ‘human seed’ so as to maximise their population.

The core question is whether the type of male-male relationship referred to here has anything in common with today’s ‘permanent, faithful stable’ life partnerships between two men which often enrich the community around them as well as the partners themselves. It is argued that such partnerships model responsible behaviour for those of a same-sex orientation, who may be driven to casual sexual relationships by wholesale condemnation. In other words we need to ask, ***‘Is this, that?’*** The Hebrew text here, literally, *‘You shall not lie down with a male the lying-down of a woman’* suggests it is not. As the Hebrew phrase shows, this culture considered it shamefully unmanly for a male to take the submissive position of a female in this context.

Leviticus 18. On sexual relations

¹The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. ³You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. ⁴My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the Lord your God. ⁵You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord. . . . ⁶None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness: I am the Lord. . . ²¹You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. ²²**You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.** ²³You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion. ²⁴ Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. ²⁵Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. ²⁶But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you . . . ²⁸otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. ²⁹For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people.

Leviticus 20. Penalties for Violations of Holiness

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²Say further to the people of Israel: Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death... ⁶ If any turn to mediums and wizards, prostituting themselves to them, I will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people.

⁷Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am the Lord your God. ⁸Keep my statutes, and observe them; I am the Lord; I sanctify you. ⁹All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them. ¹⁰If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. . . ¹³**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. ¹⁴If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity;

they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you. ¹⁵If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the animal... ²²You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out.

²³You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. ²⁴ I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the Lord your God; I have separated you from the peoples. ²⁵You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean . . .

²⁶You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.

A traditionalist reading

Leviticus 18

v.1-2. The people of Israel are solemnly addressed by God here. The repeated 'I am the Lord your God' indicates the importance of this section.

vv.6–23. The placing of the prohibition of male-male sexual relations between those against incest and those against bestiality show that this rule must be taken with equal seriousness. We cannot pick and choose which of the sexual prohibitions suit us and which do not. The prohibition is strengthened by defining it as an 'abomination'. Like the ancient Israelites, our own society also has always considered same-sex intercourse a perversion of nature.

Leviticus 20.

vv.10–16. The death penalty commanded equally for adultery, incest, male-male sexual intercourse and bestiality shows that all these are considered major infringements of God's will for His people. How can we not agree? How can we tolerate any of them in the Christian community? Or do we?

Another reading.**Leviticus 18.**

vv.1-2. It is the House of Israel which is addressed here, in its own time (whether during the first settlement of the land or its return from the exile in Babylon in the late 6th century BC). The commands were appropriate in that context; that does not mean they are all necessarily appropriate for us now.

vv.21-23. The prohibition of child sacrifice to Molech immediately before that of male-male intercourse suggests that such activity then took place in the context of a Canaanite fertility cult. Its placing before the prohibition of bestiality suggests that the forbidden behaviour referred to was far from any setting of respectful and loving relationship (and this is the only kind of relationship which Christians can consider appropriate for sexual activity, whether 'gay' or 'straight'). So we have to ask, *'Is this, that?'*

v. 22. The Hebrew word translated by 'abomination' is **'toe-ay-vah'**, a ritual word better translated 'wrongful mixing', indicating an anxiety about crossing boundaries or confusing categories. It is also used to describe ritually unclean food in Deuteronomy or marrying someone outside the faith in Malachi. This makes the act forbidden here more an offence against purity laws than against the moral law, which essentially requires that we act, think and speak always in accordance with the command to love God and our fellow human-beings. (Deut.6.5, Lev.19.18, Luke 10.25-28, Matt. 5.43-46.)

Leviticus 20. vv.22-26

The constant theme of the requirement for Israel to be 'separate' from the surrounding nations, and therefore to 'not follow their practices' emphasises the 'purity code' aspect of the forbidden activity. Male – male sexual activity as an acceptable extra-marital adventure was common in Babylonian culture, under which the exiles from Jerusalem suffered for some 70 years, as well as being an ingredient of the fertility cults of Canaan. The threat of being 'vomited out' from the land once again speaks to the Israelite exiles longing for the Promised Land.

vv. 2, 9–16. The death penalty is required equally for sacrificing children to Molech, cursing parents, adultery, incest, male-male sexual relations and bestiality. The list and the punishment clearly both come from a very different cultural context to our own. This means that we need to seek out the deepest principles of the Jewish ethical tradition we have inherited – as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount – considering carefully what are the most serious sins today and what sanctions should apply.

SOME QUESTIONS

From what we have seen of God's commands to the people of Israel recorded in Leviticus, and from what we understand of the setting in which they were received, to what extent do we believe that God is addressing Christians in Ireland today with the same commands?

How would we identify, with the inspiration of scripture, the personal behaviour that *in our time* is most likely to cause human alienation, suffering and distress?

How does it relate to the love command of Jesus?

What do we consider 'abominable', absolutely unacceptable, or 'taboo' in Ireland today? What has influenced us most in this regard: the Church, our peer group, or our own personal experience, reflection and prayer?

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

STUDY 3 – What the creation stories tell us about sexuality.

Introduction

What was God's intention for human beings in creating them male and female?

Insights from Genesis are highly relevant to the issue of homosexuality as we ponder the two narratives of God's creation of humanity. The main question relating to homosexuality arising from the two narratives is whether by creating human beings male and female, God laid down a norm of heterosexual relationship only, or whether same-sex orientation can be accepted as a variant that is part of God's greater plan for humanity.

There has been much discussion about possible influences on a person's sexuality. Same-sex orientation is the focus of much debate in the Church, with some people believing that for a small percentage of individuals this is an inborn, God-given feature of their lives, to be accepted and used for good. It can be argued that if an individual is made in a certain way with an inborn same-sex disposition, it would be morally wrong to judge that person for having, and in appropriate circumstances acting on, the sexual impulses which are natural for them. Others would say that, regardless of personal disposition, every one is responsible for their own behaviour and should not act on impulses that are condemned in Scripture as against God's will.

One view of God's creating the two sexes with 'complementary' sexual organs is that he thus intended sexual relations to be specifically for procreation, this making homosexual relations sinful *per se*. An alternative view is that this physical complementarity does not rule out the possibility of productive same-sex relationships that benefit both the individuals concerned and society. Some believe that physical sexuality, while a component of every individual's existence, cannot be allowed full expression in the case of homosexual partner-ships. Others think that, since God decreed that 'it is not good for man to be alone', he wants gay people to live out their lives abundantly, enjoying sexual fulfilment and undertaking social responsibilities with their life- partners.

Whichever personal views you hold about homosexuality, the Bible provides appropriate guidance as to God's will for his Creation.

Genesis 1 – 2 Two accounts of the Creation of Men and Women

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . ²⁴And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' ²⁷**So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.** ²⁸**God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'**

Genesis 2:18-24

¹⁸**Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'** ¹⁹So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹**So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.** ²²**And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.** ²³Then the man said,

'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'

²⁴**Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.**

Two New Testament texts with bearing on the discussion:

Mark 10:6-9

'But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' ⁷For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

John 10:9-10.

Jesus said ⁹'I am the gate [for the sheep]. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to kill and destroy, **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.**

A traditionalist reading

Gen. 1:26a, 27. God created human-beings in his image, male and female. The implication is that God intended a clear division of male and female, their complementary sexual organs prescribing heterosexual relations only. God decreed marriage as a union of male and female (seen in a Greek myth as a reconstitution of the unity of the original human being). Assuming that there *is* a so-called orientation toward members of one's own gender, it does not follow that a socio-biological impulse is moral. A same-sex orientation is no different to any other proclivity to sinning outside of God's norm of heterosexual relations only; a predisposition to homosexuality is *per se* sinful, and no different from a predisposition to any other prohibited sex acts, e.g. incest, paedophilia, or bestiality.

Gen. 2:18, 21-23. God made female to be with male. He did not create male to be with another male or female to be with another female. So, not only did God create the two sexes different, but *for each other*, as God brought the woman he had made 'to the man'. There is no other pairing of human beings mentioned by the writers of Genesis than that of male and female. Because of the prescriptive nature of Genesis 2:18-24, there would need to be very strong biblical evidence to overturn its implicit prohibition of homosexual activity as sin, but there is no such evidence in Scripture.

Gen. 2:24. God has destined that man leave his parents to be with a woman, to cling to her as his wife. God also ordains that it is man and woman who become one flesh, that is, have sexual relations. He did not ordain that man become one flesh with another man or that a woman with another woman, either in a short-term sexual encounter or in a long-term relationship.

Mark 10:6-9. Jesus quotes the two Genesis passages and reinforces the view that man is meant for woman, a fact that precludes homosexual relations. Jesus then adds to our understanding of male and female relationships in saying that 'they are no longer two, but one flesh' and 'what God has joined, let no one separate.' Jesus here is speaking specifically to what proper sexual relationships are by saying that they should be exclusively between a man and a woman.

John 10:10b. Jesus' saying that he came so that we may have abundant life does not mean that we can do whatever we want, sinning by engaging in homosexual practice with impunity.

Another reading

Gen. 1:26-27. When God created human beings 'in his image', he made them to reflect some of himself, the love, truth and creativity of his being. He did not make 'mistakes' in creating people with their various orientations, sexual or otherwise. Variability is found everywhere in creation. The fact that Genesis speaks of male and female suggests that God is, indeed, concerned with physical sexuality, not just spiritual being; and whether people are heterosexual or homosexual, the physical expression of love deepens a partnership, bringing comfort and joy to both partners and an overflow of that joy into the world around them. Sexual differentiation between the sexes does not preclude same-sex relations.

Gen. 2:18. God's intention in creating another human being to be a 'partner' or 'helper' is to provide for long-term family relationships for people in which they may be comforted and assisted in their lives. 'It is not good for man (or woman) to be alone.' Same-sex partnerships fulfil God's desire that people not be alone but in sustained, loving relationships. For Adam, a 'helper as his partner' was Eve; for most men, a woman is the right partner, but for those who identify as gay or lesbian a 'suitable' partner is one of their own gender.

Gen. 2:24. In saying that 'a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh', Genesis indicates that God intends people to develop as mature adults in permanently bonded relationships. While the focus here is also implicitly on procreation, 'one flesh' should not be taken to refer to sexual activity but to becoming 'a new family', this being the biblical usage of the word 'flesh'. Genesis 1 and 2 are not 'law', but poetic stories from Ancient Israel told to explain how things came to be.

Mark 10:6-9. Although speaking in the context of his ruling against divorce, when Jesus cites the Genesis passages, he is confirming God's intention that people should not normally be alone, but share their lives with another human being, joined together as 'family' in a long-term, monogamous, loving relationship.

John 10:10b. Jesus promises us 'abundant life', and wants this all-encompassing abundant life for Christians to include consummating our life-partnerships in a physical way, whatever our sexual orientation. God does not say to homosexuals: 'I made a mistake. Too bad. You'll have to be alone.'

SOME QUESTIONS

When God created males and females and their complementary sexual organs, was this indicative of God's prohibition of homosexual physical acts, even within a long-term, loving, monogamous relationship? Or not?

Do we think that sexual orientation is God-given, part of the way a person is made, not chosen by the individual concerned? Or do we consider constant same-sex attraction as an example of a biblical truth that all people have certain sinful predispositions?

Do we believe that God desires each person to have a 'suitable helper', as indicated in the biblical story of Adam and Eve? Is it within God's plan for human flourishing that a 'suitable helper' could in certain cases be a partner of the same gender?

Jesus said that he came so that we may live life 'abundantly'. Does living life abundantly include fulfilling our desire to consummate physically our deepest human relationship? Or, does Jesus' speaking of living life 'abundantly' have nothing to do with sexual fulfilment and human bonding?

STUDY 4. St Paul's teaching on shameful and unnatural lust.

It is clear from this important passage that St Paul regarded homosexual practice as unnatural, degraded and repulsive, and as a typical feature of Gentile culture* – one that Gentiles turning to Christ must reject and leave behind completely.

However on reading the passage carefully we see that Paul saw 'unnatural' sexual practices not as stand-alone sins but as God's punishment for and the inevitable result of the core sin of idolatry – the worship not only of the gods of the Roman pantheon but of images of 'human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles'. The existence of 'sacred' prostitution at pagan shrines may have influenced him in this. Further, God also *gave them up to* - (the phrase is a refrain here) – 'every kind of wickedness', sins against individuals and society which he enumerates extensively along the lines of the Stoic teaching of the day (it's worth checking them out!). For idolatry as the source of evil and the 'just penalty' that inevitably follows, cf. Wisdom 14. 22-31.

The question for us today is: do we read and accept this passage as a blanket condemnation of all same-sex intimacy, whatever the context of the relationship? Or can we, while agreeing with Paul's rejection of all debased, irresponsible and purely recreational forms of sexual contact, nonetheless offer support to couples whose same-sex orientation has led them into stable and loving life-partnerships consummated with one another? There was no concept of sexual 'orientation' or 'homosexuality' in Paul's day, or indeed until the late 19th century; and it is unlikely that he had encountered any stable same-sex partner-ships in the Gentile culture of his time.

Two later passages from Romans, from chapters 13 and 14 respectively, may help us think further about our answer to these questions.

*It is known that Roman as well as Hellenistic society condoned male-male sexual activity, and that men routinely used their male slaves in this way as well as resorting to brothels, also that female prostitutes preferred sexual practices that would not lead to pregnancy.

Romans 1. 16 -32.**Debased sexuality – God’s punishment for idolatry**

¹⁶ I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘the one who is righteous will live by faith’. ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. ²⁴ **Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves,** ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason **God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,** ²⁷ **and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.** ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹ They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die - yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Romans 13.8 –10. Love is the fulfilling of the Law

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Romans 14.10-19. Do Not Judge Another

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . 13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another. **¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.** Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. ¹⁸The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. ¹⁹Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification.

A traditionalist reading.

Rom.1.vv.16 -17. Paul emphasises the salvation brought by the Gospel for those who accept it, whether Jew or Gentile.

vv.18ff. He goes on to decry the godlessness typical of pagan society, which should have recognised the presence of God the Creator in his creation and worshipped him as creator, even without receiving the Gospel. By turning instead to the worship of idols, they incurred his wrath, as was shown by the debased sexual practices which resulted from their turning away from the true God.

v.24ff. *Therefore God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts and to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies.* St Paul sees the pagans' same-sex behaviour, as detailed further in v.27, as a result of their rejection of God and ingratitude for creation as he designed it. This implies that those who have been saved by faith through accepting the Gospel will not fall into such unnatural behaviour, or will be delivered from it.

v.28ff. *God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.* ²⁹*They were filled with every kind of wickedness. . .* This indicates that the next step for those who persist in homosexual practice is an ever deepening sinfulness which affects every area of their lives and poisons the society around them.

Romans 13

v.10. Given Paul's point that *love is the fulfilling of the law*, it is not truly loving either to indulge in or to condone same-sex activity, since this is not what God intended.

Romans 14

v.15 of this passage implies that we should not indulge in any practice that gives offence to our neighbours. 'Uncleanness' is indeed the way many Christians regard same-sex attachments today. So even if homosexuals are not 'judged' by the Church they should refrain from sexual expression for the sake of those who find it offensive.

Another reading

Paul's contention is that every one should recognise the true creator God *because God has shown it to them*. But the fact is that monotheism is a relatively late development in religious history, preceded by the worship of 'specialised' gods – sun, moon, thunder, fertility etc - which were personalised and represented by idols. Paul, as a Jew who naturally contrasted Israel's worship of Yahweh with the paganism all around, could not have known this. His view that debased sexual practices derived from idolatry was common in Jewish anti-Gentile writings of the time

Rom.1.vv.24-27. Notice that the vocabulary Paul uses in relation to 'unnatural' sexual practice does not include words denoting 'sin' but rather impurity, dishonour, shamelessness etc. Even the word 'lust' is a translation of a more neutral Greek word meaning 'desire'. Paul saw same-sex activity as causing ritual impurity and probably associated it with pagan ritual practice. He also deplored the degrading trivialization of sex in Graeco-Roman society, as we do in ours. There was no model of 'civil partnership' in his world, but many outlets for recreational sex were generally accepted.

vv.26-27. *Unnatural intercourse.* The same phrase is used for both women and men, but Paul probably did not have Lesbianism in mind. The unnaturalness of *their women* may have been sexual activity designed to avoid pregnancy and incest, whereas in the case of the men, it is specified that they *were consumed with passion for one another*.

The question of what is '**unnatural**' has been blown open in the last 50 years by respectable scientific research which indicates that around 5% of human beings, of all races, *naturally and not pathologically* are sexually attracted to people of the same gender – rather as some people are naturally left-handed. It is a regular variant, but not a predictable one. Hence while with Paul we condemn irresponsible, exploitative sexual practice, we have no right to condemn those who are *naturally* of same-sex orientation to lives in which they cannot fully express their love for their life-partners.

Rom.13.10. *Love is the fulfilling of the law* implies that sexual partnerships animated by mutually faithful love deserve our respect.

Rom.14.10-19. This passage can be taken to mean that same-sex couples must refrain from sexual expression because it offends some members of the Church. But it must also be considered that a greater offence is caused to couples by being rejected and marginalised on account of a relationship that is natural and life-giving for them.

SOME QUESTIONS

Is Paul speaking of individuals or of Gentile culture as a whole in saying that on account of idolatry *God gave them up to impurity*?

Is this how Christians would explain homosexuality today?

If Jewish 'purity' issues as such are of less importance to us today than they were to Paul, what *are* our firmest principles with regard to sexual behaviour? What guidelines do we offer our children?

If, as Paul writes, *love is the fulfilling of the law*, how might the presence of mutual self-giving love in a stable same-sex partnership have modified Paul's views? To what extent might it modify conservative views on sexual ethics today? With what results?

*Is THIS (21st century stable same-sex partnership)
the same as THAT (the degraded same-sex activity of Rom. 1) ?*

STUDY 5. Sin lists, condemnation, exemption, redemption.

Apart from last week's passage from Romans, there are only two places in the New Testament where the unacceptability of same-sex activity is stated: in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and in the 1st Letter to Timothy, probably written in Paul's name a generation later. In both passages, terms indicative of same-sex misbehaviour feature in examples of the 'sin-lists' which were common to Christian, Jewish and Hellenistic writing of the 1st century, including anything from murder and idolatry to gossip and disrespect for parents. The 1 Corinthians passage lists those 'who will not inherit the kingdom of God'; the 1 Timothy verses specify those for whom the law is designed – 'the lawless and disobedient' – going on to specify certain types of sinner which come to mind. Included in the 1 Corinthians list, along with fornicators, adulterers and robbers, are two words whose exact meaning is uncertain, and which therefore have been translated by many different English terms – they are *arsenokoites*, indicating a male who shares a bed with another man, and *malakoi*, or 'soft ones', indicating an effeminate man or an immature boy, the receptive partner in a same-sex encounter, probably either the object of pederasty or a male prostitute. Paul may or may not have coined *arsenokoitai* with Leviticus 18 in mind; it is not found in any texts before that of 1 Corinthians.

The question is whether these terms should be taken today to refer to **all** same-sex encounters or merely to exploitative, casual or harmful ones. A further question is whether we can in good conscience **modify** these condemnations, even if they were intended to be all-encompassing, in view of our more developed scientific understanding of these matters and the differences between our cultures. Or not.

The story of Cornelius and his friends, the 'unclean' Gentiles who are accepted by God, receiving the Holy Spirit just as the apostles did, may be taken to indicate that the Jewish purity laws do not as such apply to Gentile Christians. Sin remains sin, however!

1 Corinthians 6.9-19.

These sinners will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

⁹ 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.** ¹¹And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. ¹²All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial ... ¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?... ¹⁸Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?

1 Timothy 1. 8 -11.

The law was given to convict these people.

⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. ⁹This means understanding that **the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers,** ¹⁰**fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching** ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Acts 10.30 - 11.18**The first Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit –
and are accepted by Peter and the Church**

³⁰ Cornelius [the Roman centurion, told Peter} ‘Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. ³¹He said, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³²Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.” ³³Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.’ ³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them . . . ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. **11** ¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step . . . ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’

A traditionalist reading.

I Cor.6 .9-19. Here Paul is upbraiding the Corinthians for taking their disagreements to court instead of to fellow believers, and for the behaviour that leads to judgment by others in the first place. Although less than half of the sins in the list of vv.9-10 are sexual, Paul in vv.14-19 is particularly concerned with sexual sin. His injunction to remember that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit should logically be applied to all sexual sin, even though only ‘fornication’ (*porneia*) is mentioned. Two of the items on the list of v.9, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, refer to same-sex inter-course (the context is unspecified) clearly as serious as fornication.

v.11 should probably be taken as sarcastic. The context makes it clear that the Corinthian Christians were far from perfect!

1 Tim.1.8-11. The writer has been criticizing those who deviate from ‘divine training’, desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding what they are talking about. Perhaps they have been judging fellow Christians inappropriately, since the point made is that the law is designed not for the innocent but for ‘the lawless and disobedient’. Once again *arsenokoitai* ‘men lying with men’ features on the sin list, and there is no reason to take their presence there less seriously than that of the ‘fornicators’.

Acts 10.30 – 11.18. It is clear from Acts and from Paul’s early letters that Peter was much more conservative than was Paul with regard to retaining Jewish purity regulations. Eating or socialising with uncircumcised Gentiles was antipathetic to him, so the gift of the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his party shocked and then impressed him deeply. But even if circumcision was agreed to be unnecessary, the waiving of that preeminent purity command did not mean that the sexuality sanctions of Leviticus 18 were set aside for Gentiles. The Council of Jerusalem of Acts 15 directed that the Church would impose no further burden on Gentile converts ‘than that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood and what has been strangled and from fornication’. If fornication was still prohibited why should same-sex activity be exempt?

Another reading.

I Cor.6 .9-19. Paul in this passage and the preceding chapter is concerned for sexual probity within the Christian community and its ability to administer its own discipline without reference to the legal world beyond its doors. There is no doubt that he abhorred all the sexual sins he mentions; but Paul is no legalist. Even while listing unacceptable sins, he declares that ‘all things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial’. This refers us to Romans 13 (Study 4) where he rules that ‘love is the fulfilling of the law’. His reminder here that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (and therefore not to be contaminated by fornication) may still lead us to consider that love-making between committed same-sex partners can be disclosive of God’s love and our response to God’s love, even though this idea was not part of Paul’s thinking when he wrote.

1 Tim.1.8-11. Once again, ‘the law’ is under discussion in this passage. It is not for the ‘innocent’, but to control the behaviour of those liable to sin, among whom ‘men lying with men’ are mentioned. However some Christians today will witness from their own experience that same-sex alliances they have known are not only ‘innocent’ in the sense of harming no one, but positively productive of good not only for the partners but for their church community. Under such conditions, the appropriate response to such a couple is not judgment but affirmation.

Acts 10.30 – 11.18. The spontaneous responses of some people to same-sex relations today are similar to those of 1st century Jews to Gentiles. They are unclean; their practices are disgusting; their philosophy is alien; they are not to be touched, eaten with, or entertained, for fear of contamination. This was how Peter originally thought of non-Jewish people. Just as God corrected Peter by pouring his Spirit out on Cornelius and his group, so He may be correcting the Church’s indiscriminate outlawing of responsible same-sex partnerships today. Irresponsible, lustful ‘fornication’ as such must still be shunned (Acts 15.29), but not life-enhancing love between people of the same gender.

SOME QUESTIONS

What new ideas have we encountered in this series of Bible Studies?

To what extent, and with what degree of comfort, have we been able to discuss the issues openly, within the group or outside it, with friends or colleagues of same-sex orientation?

How do Paul and Jesus understand the Law in relation to human and divine Love?

Are we any nearer to deciding for ourselves:

*Is THIS (21st century stable same-sex partnerships)
the same as THAT (the same-sex activity denounced by Paul)?*

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

We at BACI would be grateful to know how your group got on with this study. Do please send us your feed-back to
<baci.anglican@gmail.com>

APPENDIX: HOW SHOULD WE READ SCRIPTURE?*Some thoughts on Biblical Interpretation from Ginnie Kennerley*

IT HAS been said that ‘it takes the whole Church to discern the whole truth’; but finding God’s deepest truth in the biblical texts requires above all the presence of the Holy Spirit as we read. We seek to hear the Spirit’s voice through the texts, just as those who wrote the Scriptures heard it in their day. So we should read the Bible with open hearts and minds - open to God and also to our fellow Christians, sharing the Spirit’s prompting as we go.

Scripture is essential sustenance for Christian faith and spiritual discernment. Yet, lest we fall into literalism or ‘bibliolatry’, we need to remember that it is God whom we worship, God whose revelation we seek through Scripture, God whose presence we seek in prayer - God as shown to us by, in, and through Jesus Christ, yet always beyond us. The Bible shows us the way, just as it has shown generations of Christians before us; and it leads us to Jesus, who is acclaimed in the Gospel as both the Way to God and the Word of God.

So far, so good. But some faithful Christians would still ask how can the Bible, which numbers 66 books by as many authors writing over a distant period of maybe 1200 years in the Eastern Mediterranean, really give us detailed guidance for our lives today? How can it help sort out the differences between conscientious Christians in our time? Especially on the controversial issues around human sexuality?

The views of Christians vary on this, but all would agree that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is essential, and that reading together with other Christians is helpful. Beyond that, some consider it important to know something of the conditions and the culture in which the scriptures were written, saying that this can help us discern what God was saying to the people *then* so as to better perceive what he saying to us *now*, in such a different time and place, through the same texts. Others claim that the text itself is enough for them, God’s truth and God’s commands applying equally to all people in all times. A middle group between the two will recognise that misunderstandings can occur when what we take from the texts does not quite match what they meant to those who wrote them.

While *sola scriptura* was the watchword for the reformers, in the Anglican tradition we have been taught that we should be guided in our search for God's will and truth by Scripture, Tradition and Reason. While Scripture is preeminent, it can only be properly understood with the help of reason, taking account of church tradition. If Scripture, which derives from the tradition of the early Church, is read without the use of Reason and respect for Tradition, we easily fall into error.

We can be tempted to use the Bible in the service of our own convictions, which might sometimes be based on nothing more than our own prejudices or our own desires. We can also be tempted to over-emphasise Reason, disregarding biblical injunctions instead of wrestling with the text and context. If we do not attempt to interpret Scripture responsibly, using both our reason and our knowledge of tradition under the guidance of the Spirit, we can misuse this divine gift and mislead others as well as ourselves.

The history of Christian thinking and ethical debate has shown that our understanding of Scripture is always influenced, and sometimes for the better, by the cultural, intellectual and even political and economic climate of our time and place. For instance in South Africa it took many decades of re-thinking church teaching to overcome the claim that *apartheid* was supported by Scripture. The same was true of the 18th century claim that slavery was proved by the Bible to be in accordance with God's will.

The church-dividing issue in this century in relation to biblical interpretation is that of same-sex partnerships. Can these ever be in accordance with God's will? If so, does God make conditions? Can members of such partnerships – if they involve full sexual expression - be accepted as members of our parish or community? If so, can they have leadership roles? As pastors, as teachers, even as bishops?

Some would at this point answer 'No' to all these questions; some would answer 'Yes'. Others would answer 'Yes' to some and 'No' to others. The aim of these Bible Studies has been to help us consider together the way the traditionalist 'Noes' and the re-thinking 'Yeses' read and interpret key biblical texts in this area. We hope this process helps participants to explore their own thinking and feeling on the issues in an informed dialogue with Scripture, in the light of the life and teaching of Jesus. May this opportunity to discuss the issues respectfully together lead us all towards at least provisional agreement on a way forward in the Church of Ireland.