

## HUMAN SEXUALITY & QUESTIONS – HISTORY & BIBLE STUDY

The general characteristics of human life together have changed very much through the ages. Heterosexual marriage has gone through a dramatic change. In the Old Testament polygamy was accepted and encouraged. In the New Testament the subordination of women under men is very obvious. This view makes a woman her father's daughter, her husband's wife and finally her son's mother. But she is never really something in/as herself!

Today both polygamy and subordination are foreign for our contemporary society as well as for the churches of our time.

We have to add that in the New Testament the attitude of Jesus towards women is different, filled with respect and love. Jesus's attitude is remarkable. The biblical examples underline that Jesus met downtrodden women with openness and empathy, and this is true even with prostitutes or women with immoral behaviour.

We should also add St Paul's words in Galatians 3,28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." That text has often been given a limited application in Church history as well as in society. That does not take away the radicalism and the challenging message that still confronts and provokes all patriarchal structures.

The history of relations between men and women in marriage is complex. It has even been questioned if the old understanding of polygamous marriage and marriage within the structure of female subordination is at all the same phenomenon as marriage today. What we can call attention to is the continuous change through history, a change that should make us all humble when speaking of human life together and what it should be like.

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The history of homosexual relations also is a dramatic history with constant variations. Even in modern time conditions have been changed substantially. In Sweden - where I live – homosexuality was criminal until 1944 and looked upon officially as a disease until 1974. In England and Wales it was criminalised until 1967. In Scotland decriminalisation took place in 1980, in Northern Ireland in 1982.

The history of homosexuality is a rather tragic one. We have clear evidences for a great number suicides, not least among young persons, including those in Christian families. In the Nordic countries, some years ago there was an investigation presenting a disproportionate number of children of conservative Free Church pastors who committed suicide. Unfortunately it also has been shown that young homosexual people within mainly conservative Christian families in the established churches have committed suicide in a number that is remarkable.

Homosexuality has been looked upon as a sin and often condemned from the pulpit as well as in Christian education, confirmation teaching etc.

The Church of Sweden started in the 1950's to investigate the conditions for homosexuals. In 1974 the first official Church report was published with the recommendation to show respect, empathy and understanding towards homosexuals. In 1995 the Church officially acknowledged the possibility of blessing same-sex partnerships. In 2009 the Church of Sweden accepted same-sex marriages on the same conditions as heterosexual marriages.

In the Lutheran Church in Great Britain (LCiGB) there has been a recommendation by the Clergy Ministerium to allow the blessing of same-sex partnerships. It is not compulsory for a pastor who is doubtful or negative towards same-sex relations but pastors who are willing to bless same-sex couples are welcome to do so.

In order to become a pastor in the LCiGB there will be many requirements of theological and pastoral capacity as well as personal maturity. The sexual orientation is however irrelevant. As the LCiGB does not stand for a position that homosexuality is sinful, there is no reason to make sexual orientation an issue on the decisions about vocations. This does not mean that any sexual behaviour is accepted. On the contrary, the LCiGB will strongly defend and demand a mature and conscious attitude in relation to the candidate's sexuality. Here the same claims will be raised whether the candidate is heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual.

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### *Bible study*

I would like to go through the passages in the Bible that refer to homosexuality. We may go through them all since they are not so many.

1 Genesis 19, 1-13 (Sodom)

The point of this story was for a long time understood as the lack of hospitality. In Matthew 10,14f, Jesus uses Sodom as an example for this. The story has nothing to do with faithful, lifelong, same-sex relationships. It is a story about gang rape where Lot is prepared to offer his daughters to be raped by the crowd as substitutes for his male guests. The story is certainly negative towards irresponsible sexual behaviour; it is a story against promiscuity of all kinds.

2 Judges 19, 16-30 (especially 22-25)

Again the story has nothing to do with faithful, lifelong, same-sex relationships. It is once more a question of gang rape with disgusting consequences. The story gives a very difficult view of women, hard to read even today. The story may be interpreted as criticism against promiscuity.

3 Leviticus 18,22 and 20,13

These verses are part of the so-called Law of Holiness. Homosexuality is here condemned but so is the cutting of hair: "You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard" (Lev 19,27). As far as we know there has never been any church applying the Law of Holiness. This law has been looked upon as part of the old covenant, abolished with Christ.

4 1 Corinthians 6, 9f

Here a number of people are condemned: "none of these will inherit the kingdom of God". Among these are robbers and drunkards and male prostitutes and sodomites. In the Greek original text is written *malakos* (here translated as male prostitutes) and *arsenokoitas* (here translated as sodomites). The Greek word *malakos* describes men who are gentle, soft or even effeminate.

The Greek word *arsenokoitas* is usually a word for men who exploit others, for examples young boys. This means that the biblical text condemns homosexual promiscuity but has nothing to say to faithful, lifelong, same-sex relationships.

It must also be mentioned that the view of, for instance, “drunkards” has been drastically changed today. While alcoholism was condemned as sin earlier, we nowadays normally see alcoholics as people with a lifelong illness. New knowledge has influenced our interpretation of the Bible and given us a new ethical perspective.

#### 5 Romans 1, 18-32

The passage condemns those who consciously exchanged their heterosexuality for homosexual behaviour. Behind this statement is the view that people decided themselves to do something else. This may apply very well to the situation in so-called temple prostitution in old times. Paul is condemning a sin that is known among the Gentiles.

Today we know that the homosexuals are often in despair at the discovery that they are attracted to people of their own sex. It is a discovery of something which will make life much more difficult for them, and has nothing to do with a conscious choice.

Here Paul also uses the word “natural” and “unnatural”. For Paul there is no homosexual person, only homosexual acts. This is the background to his view that heterosexuals (which includes everyone) according to Paul) gave up their natural behaviour and exchanged it for an unnatural behaviour. For Paul every human being should live according to nature.

In relation to this view, it could be said that homosexual people, whether they are homosexual genetically or their sexuality is shaped by their environment, have no choice but to live according to their homosexual nature.

#### 6 1 Timothy 1, 9f

Here again the word *arsenokoitas* (sodomites) is used. Paul condemns therefore homosexual promiscuity.

#### 7 Jude 7

Here “unnatural” lust is a description of the situation in Sodom. As we now know, “Sodom” stands for promiscuity and “unnatural” for the view that men were able to change their sexual behaviour. So here the biblical text is criticizing promiscuous sexuality that is chosen. But again nothing is said about faithful, lifelong, same-sex relationships.

The surrounding society in biblical times gave the impression that homosexuality was promiscuous. There were no possibilities for same-sex couples to live in faithful, lifelong relations. The contextual society did not permit that. This background is essential in order to understand the biblical texts. **The Bible is critical against promiscuous behaviour, both between men and women and between the same sexes.**

The main biblical message in ethical questions is without any doubt the commandment of love. In Galatians 5, 14 it is clearly said: **“For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”**

This commandment is decisive for the understanding of Christian ethics in all times. Certainly it has been interpreted in different ways in different situations. And so it should.

Christian ethics and Christian life are not blocks of stone but all the time depend on the on-going changes in human life and society. In the Bible women are not allowed to speak or to teach in the churches (1 Cor 14, 34 and 1 Tim 2, 11f), women are not permitted to have their hair braided, or to wear gold and pearls (1 Tim 2, 9). These are only examples.

This is the main question about all these rules in the Bible: do these rules encourage us to express love to our neighbour? Or do the rules go against such love? If we set aside such rules (including about women speaking in church, wearing pearls and homosexuality) are we doing so in order to observe the higher law of love? If we try to uphold such rules, are we, in so doing, belittling or ignoring the great law of God, that we show love to one another? If we accept same-sex relations, in what sense would that hinder heterosexuals to love? Is it possible to say that you may be hindered to express your love because other people love in another way? If same-sex relations do not hinder other's love, why can't we accept it? The main commission for all of us is just to live in love.

#### *From Church history*

Finally we may mention a few circumstances in Church history. We easily become blind to our own history. Therefore it might be helpful to remind each other of some historical facts.

**Slavery** was accepted in the early Church and for a long time in Christian history. Slavery was a part of life that the Bible recognised. It could be said that slavery had a biblical authorisation. But finally slavery was abolished: slavery could not co-exist with the love commandment.

**Capital punishment** was accepted in the early Church and for a long time in Christian history. There are still Christians in favour of capital punishment. In the Bible capital punishment was recognised. It could be said that the death penalty had a biblical authorisation. But finally capital punishment was abolished in many countries and rejected by many churches: it could not co-exist with the love commandment.

**Women's subordination** was accepted in the early Church and for a long time in Christian history. We still find Christians who advocate women's subordination and prohibit women from preaching or speaking or holding office in the church. You can easily find biblical recognition and encouragement of women's subordination. But finally a growing number of Christians worldwide have abolished women's subordination: it is clearly against the love commandment.

Oppression and denial of **faithful, lifelong same-sex relations** has been the attitude in churches for a long time. The Bible has been used to legitimise such a position. Today we should accept same-sex relations. We should do that because the commandment of love forces us to do so.

**“Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”**

(1 Cor 13, 13)

Rt Rev Dr Martin Lind, Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain (2012-2019)

*Literature:* Jeffrey John, 'Permanent, Faithful, Stable' Christian Same-sex Marriage. London 2012.