

# EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HERMENEUTICS

Delivered at the UCA National Retreat on Diversity  
by Rev. Dr. Peter Ralphs

The purpose of my paper is not to revisit all the biblical texts and data often used in the debate concerning homosexuality<sup>(2)</sup> - there is simply not enough time for a thorough discussion of such material and it has been sufficiently treated already in a number of scholarly publications.<sup>(3)</sup> I do not think that there are additional arguments which are going to persuade people away from the respective positions they have taken. My purpose is rather to present an explanation of how evangelicals go about doing their hermeneutics so that it can be seen why they approach this issue as they do. In other words, my paper seeks to be descriptive and informational rather than mainly exegetical, though to some extent it will also be the latter.

It is important to realize that there is a fair degree of variation amongst evangelicals as to how they do hermeneutics - ranging from a fairly naive literalism to a more sophisticated use of recognized critical tools. I am sure the same can be said for proponents of each of the positions in the sexuality debate. The perspective I will present is that which would be found in more informed contexts in mainstream evangelicalism. There would be others who would not call themselves evangelicals who would be in agreement at many points with the approach I will outline and so I am not suggesting that this approach is unique to evangelicals.

Evangelicals see themselves as standing in the stream of the Protestant Reformation and orthodoxy with regard to their approach to the Bible. The Bible is more than a collection of ancient writings by people in the Judaeo-Christian tradition bearing witness to Israel's and the early church's understanding of God and the life of faith; rather it is a collection of documents which ultimately have their origin with God. Indeed the whole of the biblical debate finally hinges on just this issue: whether you believe that the Bible ultimately comes from above or from below; whether it consists of revelation given by God or of human reflections on God and faith. At the same time an informed evangelicalism would not want to minimize the contribution of the human authors nor the historical circumstances in which the various documents came into being. It is true some evangelicals downplay the human aspect of the Bible's production; for them it is the Word of God which they tend to interpret in a fairly wooden and literalistic way without paying much regard to the historical occasion and literary genre of each writing. However, better informed and more responsible evangelicals try to respect the tension between the Bible as given by God ("God-breathed" to use the words of 2 Tim 3:16) and its human dimensions; it is both the Word of God, written, and the words of the human writers.<sup>(4)</sup>

Evangelicals would be agreed that God has seen to it that what we need to know about God and God's will has been revealed in the Bible with sufficient clarity that the Bible may be completely relied upon for the purpose of knowing God and God's will. This is not to claim a complete revelation of God but a true and sufficient revelation of God. As in all matters, so in the matter of sexuality, the Bible's teaching is seen by evangelicals as having priority over all other factors that might inform our theology and ethics. Indeed this is what primarily distinguishes evangelical theology from other theologies. Evangelical theology, like all theology, is shaped by such formative factors as tradition, reason, experience and culture,(5) but it seeks to give an overriding priority to the Bible instead of to any other formative factor. Of particular relevance to the current debate, evangelicals would accept experience as having a significant input but would reject experience as the final arbiter in theological and ethical matters. Of course Jesus Christ himself is the ultimate authority but we have no other way of getting at Jesus and his mind objectively than through the Scriptures. Evangelicals refuse to allow a wedge to be driven between the Scriptures, the written Word, and Jesus Christ, the living Word.(6)

It is the understanding of the Bible in its dual aspects as the Word of God given in human words that informs responsible evangelical approaches to its interpretation. On the one hand, evangelicals read the Bible with an expectation to be taught by God concerning God and God's interaction with the world. In other words, they see the Bible as a witness to God's self-revelation in God's creative and redemptive acts, especially centred in Jesus Christ. But more than that, most evangelicals would also see the Bible in itself as a revelation of the will of God. As such it stands over above and in judgement on all merely human attempts to define God and God's will. At the same time, the human aspect of the Bible, while not detracting from its reliability as revelation from God, means that writings must be read in terms of their historical particularity or occasion.(7)

In their hermeneutics, evangelicals are concerned, as were the Reformers, to get at the plain meaning of the text, i.e. the meaning the text would have had for its writer and original readers. At the same time they seek to discern what God may be saying through this text to the church and world today. This allows for the dynamic of the Spirit in illuminating the text; but the Spirit would not speak today in a way inconsistent with the meaning of the text as originally inspired by the Spirit. Any contemporary interpretation and application must be consistent with the original meaning. Evangelicals would accept multiple applications but not multiple meanings. They would particularly reject any approach where the meaning of the text is largely created by the modern reader or where the Bible is approached with a "hermeneutics of suspicion". In such cases, the readers, with their own agendas, sit in judgement over the text and human reason takes precedence over God's revelation rather than the other way round.

In terms of contemporary application, while some evangelicals overlook the huge cultural gap between the time and world of the Bible and the world of today, responsible evangelical hermeneutics insists on taking this

hermeneutical gap fully into account. It neither opts for the simplicity of taking everything the Bible says directly over into today's world nor for the skepticism and reductionism where very little of what the Bible says has any direct relevance. Rather it looks for the application of common sense and appropriate guidelines which are consistent with both the Bible's divine origin and its historical particularity. There is simply not time here to speak in any extended way about such guidelines or the rationale behind them except to point to a few which are relevant for the debate concerning homosexuality.

The principle texts which touch on the debate are negative references to homosexual behaviour in the OT law (Leviticus),(8) some OT narrative material (in Genesis & Judges)(9) and the NT Letters or Epistles attributed to Paul(10) and Jude(11). Very importantly alongside this is what evangelicals see as the total witness of the Bible which from Genesis 1 onwards only ever speaks positively of human sexuality in terms of appropriate heterosexual relationships, including in the teaching of Jesus himself as we have it in the Gospels and in which he affirmed the complementary nature of the sexes from the Genesis material. We cannot argue that because Jesus was silent on homosexual behaviour he would have approved of it or at least been neutral. This would be to remove Jesus from his Jewish context. His only endorsement of sexual behaviour was in the context of the commitment of heterosexual marriage, otherwise there was to be abstinence. Evangelicals see this consistent positive thrust about heterosexuality as equally significant for the debate, in terms of giving an overall biblical framework for sexuality. While there might be quibbles about just what specific references to homosexual practice encompass, in the final analysis it is the Bible's consistent teaching about sexual duality which is determinative. In this way, evangelicals seek to take the Bible's teaching as a whole on the matter of sexuality. Nor do they neglect the great biblical themes such a grace, love, justice, acceptance and liberation but they are concerned about what they see as cheap grace without responsibility, love which has been reduced to sentimentality because it has been emptied of truth and holiness, justice apart from God's standards of truth and right, acceptance which equates with indulgence, and liberation which amounts to licence. They see these great biblical themes as in no way negating the teaching of more direct statements regarding sexual behaviour.

Now I want to say a few words about the interpretation of specific texts, beginning with the OT material. Clearly the use of both OT law and narrative in doing theology presents particular problems. I only have time to talk about OT law. In interpreting OT law, two key principles are involved. Firstly, the law was addressed to Israel, not directly to the NT church or the church of today. However, we must remember that the OT was the Bible of the early church and was seen as useful for providing both theological teaching and ethical instruction for the church, through both the examples and warnings implicit in narrative and the more direct instructions of its laws.(12) Indeed, much of the moral instruction of the OT is repeated for the early Christian community in the NT. Secondly, the NT church read the OT law in the light of the fulfilment which had occurred in Jesus Christ. In fact there is a real sense in which we can say the whole NT is an interpretation of the OT in the light of that

fulfilment. Because the two testaments are linked as promise and fulfilment, we must be careful that we do not over-emphasise the element of discontinuity between the old and new covenants; there is also a strong element of continuity between the two, and between the people of God under both covenants.

While acknowledging diversity within the NT, generally speaking the NT's approach is neither to negate the law entirely (as the Matthean Jesus says; "Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets") nor to require obedience to all its precepts. Clearly the fulfilment in Jesus means some aspects no longer apply, especially those like circumcision, sabbath keeping and the food taboos which marked Jews off from other people. Certainly keeping the law is not seen by either Jesus or Paul or any NT writer as the way into God's Kingdom or the way to remain within it. In their teaching they are law free in that regard but not lawless. Jesus calls for a more radical obedience which arises from the inner being of the person and in accordance with the law's true intent. Paul sees life in the Spirit, informed by the law's moral requirements, as a fulfilling of the law. As I have already said, many of the OT moral commands are repeated in the NT to inform Christians of God's ethical requirements. When we see these being affirmed in the NT, it is reasonable to presume that they were seen as not time or culturally bound but to be of abiding relevance. This would seem to be demonstrated by the Pauline letters which were written to Greek rather than Jewish contexts - OT moral precepts were clearly seen by Paul to apply as much to non-Jewish Christians in his day as to Israel in OT times.

This observation has direct relevance to the instructions about homosexual behaviour in Leviticus. In 1 Cor 6:9 Paul's terminology<sup>(13)</sup> clearly draws on the LXX of the Levitical references<sup>(14)</sup> to speak of the old way of life the Corinthian Christians have now left behind for their life in Christ. Thus while part of the Levitical "Holiness Code", Paul certainly did not see these instructions as relevant only to the cultic context as a reductionist hermeneutic often claims, to the effect that Israel is merely being warned not to practice in its cult the cultic activities of surrounding nations. In fact there is a lack of evidence to show that homosexual activity was a significant part of cultic activity among Israel's immediate neighbours; indeed it is hard to think of a rationale as to how such activity might relate to the fertility rites which marked their cultic activity.<sup>(15)</sup> Also to see these commands merely in terms of ceremonial rather than ethical purity seems inadequate and forges too clear cut a distinction which would be foreign to Leviticus overall. Paul certainly saw them as relating to a moral not a ceremonial issue. Likewise interpretations along the lines that the concern has to do with a misuse of semen or forceful attempts to degrade and humiliate a male by treating him as a female seem weak.

In all of this, it is not enough to offer possible alternate interpretations as if all interpretations are equal, particularly when those interpretations fly in the face of the apparent meaning of a text as the church generally has understood it. Certainly we need to listen to all possibilities in case we have been getting it wrong. But proffered interpretations need to show they better explain the text

in its original context and in the context of the Bible overall. Incidentally, the NT church seems to have been able to accept the validity of OT's moral commands without at the same time suggesting the enactment of the prescribed penalties for disobedience (in the case of both adultery and homosexual activity, death). Jesus himself accepted sinners while neither condoning their sin nor requiring the penalties be carried out (e.g. the woman who committed adultery, assuming the Johannine story represents a genuine tradition). In fact it remains a moot point as to how strictly the penalties were enacted in either ancient Israel or the Judaism of NT times.

The essence of what I am saying here is that evangelical interpretation of the OT laws and stories seeks to be guided primarily by the NT's use of the OT as it approached the OT as Scripture, the authority of which continued unabated, but which now had to be interpreted in the light of the fulfilment in Jesus and in no way did that set aside the moral instruction of the OT.

Now I want to say a few words about evangelical interpretation of the NT Letters, especially the key text in Romans 1 where both male and female homosexual behaviour are referred to. The issues for hermeneutics here are, firstly, just what is Paul referring to and, secondly, does it have relevance for people today? To take up the first issue, against reductionist interpretations which argue that Paul is concerned here only with ritual purity or cultic or promiscuous homosexual activity or that between adults and children or youths (pederasty) and not the enduring, loving relationship of a committed homosexual couple, an evangelical understanding would maintain that a more general reference to all homosexual genital activity best fits the Pauline terminology(16)and the context.

Paul is concerned in the early chapters of Romans to show the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of all of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. This serves as a foil for his teaching in Romans that one can only be in a right relationship with God through God's saving action as a gift received through faith. The second half of chapter one focuses on the Gentiles and reflects traditional Jewish polemic against the Gentiles such as we find in Wisdom of Solomon. The Gentile rejection of what God has revealed about himself as creator has resulted in both idolatry and immorality, acts of rebellion against God and God's created order for humans respectively. It is true such idolatry would demonstrate itself in a cultic context but it cannot be confined to that just as the immorality referred to cannot be so confined. This is clear from the long list of sins at the end of the chapter which touch on human activity in general and which culminates in not only the doing but the very approving of sin so that what God calls wrong is proclaimed by humans as right! In this light, a reference to homosexual practice in general, as a rejection of God's order in creation, best fits the overall context and is the traditional understanding - this is consistent with the approach taken by such recent major commentators as Fitzmyer, Dunn, Moo, Ziesler, Byrne, Kasemann, Schreiner.

Some discussion has taken place over what Paul means by doing things contrary to "nature" in this passage.(17) Again time precludes anything but a cursory look at this. Some have suggested that Paul has in mind people's

individual sexual nature or orientation rather than God's ordering for humans in general with regard to sexuality - and so the activity he condemns is not homosexual activity per se but sexual activity contrary to a person's individual sexual orientation. While this is an ingenious suggestion, it is an anachronism. It reads back into Paul's mind the contemporary distinction between homosexual orientation and practice.(18) Moreover Paul normally uses the term(19) to refer to what is generally so in the world and amongst human beings, understood as the common natural order of things.(20) Accordingly, evangelicals would see the interpretation that Paul speaks about individual nature or orientation as a reductionist interpretation that does not fit the context. They would view such reductionist interpretations as failing to convince and as the product not so much of careful historical-grammatical exegesis but of contemporary post-modern culture with its rejection of absolutes and tolerance of diversity. Indeed in general they would argue that the onus is on those who proffer alternative interpretations against the traditional understanding to demonstrate clearly that their interpretation is the plain meaning of the text in its own context.

Of course it is one thing to establish what Paul had in mind; it is another to agree with him and see what he says as having relevance for people today. Indeed, Pim Pronk,(21) who has doctorates in both theology and biology, and who is a practising homosexual, accepts that Paul in Rom 1 does refer to homosexual practice in general but Pronk rejects this as having moral relevance for today. However, evangelicals would see such texts are highly relevant for today. They would argue the moral/ethical teaching of the NT applies across time and cultures. Just as Paul did not see the Levitical instructions concerning homosexual practices as time or culturally bound, neither should we see the NT teaching on the same matter as applicable only to a particular time or culture. They would point to a number of considerations in this regard. The negative references to homosexual activity are consistent across the NT, found in Letters attributed to different writers such as Paul and Jude written to both Greek and Jewish contexts; this suggests they are of trans-cultural relevance. Further, such references are counter-cultural in the Graeco-Roman context where generally there was an openness to male (but not female)(22) homosexual activity within limits. In this way Paul, while he might reflect his own Jewish culture, certainly does not reflect the culture of his readers, but calls on Christians to go against aspects of it! In other words, there seems to be nothing culturally-driven in all this; if anything it is counter-cultural. In fact the negative references are found in contexts dealing with morality, rather than mere matters of cultural custom. Further in terms of canonical context, the NT references are consistent with the negative references in the OT and further with the overall positive thrust of Scripture concerning heterosexual marriage.

Evangelicals would argue there is nothing in contemporary understandings of homosexuality which would lead them or should lead the church to set aside what Scripture teaches on homosexual behaviour. While wanting to learn from current research into the causes of homosexuality and respecting the distinction many though not all make between homosexual orientation, inclination or preference, on the one hand, and homosexual practice, on the

other hand, they would still see the Bible's teaching as having priority and being determinative for our moral theology on this issue. Hence the informed evangelical position seeks to be one of compassion and acceptance of all persons, including homosexual persons (and granted evangelicals need to do a lot better at this), but rejection of what the Bible calls sin, including genital homosexual practices, in whatever context. It is one thing to acknowledge that all in the church continue to struggle with sin and lack of wholeness in one form or another; it is another for the church to officially adopt a moral position at variance with Scripture and to allow those in leadership either to practice immorality or to promote it in their teaching.

In response to the tired argument that if we adopted a similar hermeneutical approach to the issues of slavery and the role of women we would still be promoting slavery and restrictions on women today, evangelicals would point out that in these two other issues there is within Scripture itself a great weight of material which balances the texts which seem to accept slavery or endorse cultural restrictions on women. For example, in regard to women, we find such counter-balancing material from Gen 1 with its creation of the two sexes in the image of God, through the counter-cultural acceptance by Jesus of women as fully-fledged disciples, to the Magna Carta of Christian freedom in Gal 3:28.(23) It is this material, not merely a social agenda, which causes us to look carefully at the apparently restrictive references in 1 Cor and 1 Tim and which leads many evangelicals to agree that these are probably culturally bound and apply to specific circumstances in Corinth and Ephesus. They have to do with behaviour in corporate worship and, unlike the texts concerning homosexual behaviour, do not appear in contexts to do with morality and sin. On the other hand, there are no counter-balancing texts with regard to homosexuality; rather there is the consistent positive teaching of the Bible concerning sexuality in terms of heterosexuality. The attempt to find some counter-balancing material in relationships like those between David and Jonathan, and even Jesus and John, would be seen by evangelicals as special pleading without a shred of clear evidence in the text.(24)

What I have tried to do is give some understanding of how responsible evangelicals go about trying to do hermeneutics. We reject the caricature of wooden literalism in hermeneutics that is often used unfairly against evangelicals. We see ourselves as operating within the parameters of the approach of the Basis of Union to Scripture so that the church not only hears the Word of God in this unique prophetic and apostolic testimony but by this very testimony the church's faith and obedience is both nourished and regulated.(25)

*Rev Dr Peter Ralphs, DipD&M, BD(Hons), MTh, ThD*  
Lecturer in NT and Theology, Bible College of Queensland  
UCA Minister of the Word

## ENDNOTES

1. I approach "hermeneutics" in this paper in the broader sense of seeking to understand what a text of the Bible is saying in its own context (historical, cultural, literary, canonical) and what relevance it might have for the church/world today. That is, hermeneutics involves historical exegesis, theological exegesis (in terms of the canon) and contemporary application.

2. It is important to observe that this paper has to do with the issue of homosexual behaviour (which implies but is not confined to same-sex genital activity), not homosexual persons per se.

3. For example, T.E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and clarity in the homosexuality debate* (Leicester: IVP, 1995); S.J. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); P. Pronk, *Against Nature: Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); D.J. Wold, *Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); P. Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality* (London: SPCK, 1980); also J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: UCP, 1980) and the response by R.B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986) 184-215. In a UCA context cf. B. Edgar, "Sexuality and God" in *Sexuality: exploring the issues* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1996).

4. How these two aspects intersect is no more capable of definition than is how the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ have come together in the one person as understood by orthodox Christology. There is an element of mystery. This is not to equate the divine-human aspects of the Bible with the divine-human aspects of Jesus Christ the Living Word but it is to see a certain parallel between the two. There is no one evangelical understanding of the "how" of what is traditionally called the Bible's inspiration (just as there has been no one orthodox view) and many would prefer to leave the divine-human interaction in the production of Scripture undefined. Certainly many, though not all, evangelicals have tended toward a view of verbal inspiration, so that each word, not merely each thought, is as God would have it. This is different from the view evangelicals are sometimes accused of having which holds that God dictated each word; very few informed evangelicals would adopt such a mechanical view. Incidentally, by "inspiration" evangelicals refer to the fact Scripture is "breathed-out" by God (i.e. God-given), not to the Bible's ability to inspire the reader! Just because a particular text does not inspire us or appear relevant to us does not make it any less "inspired"; this would be to elevate our response to Scripture and sense of relevance to a great height indeed and ultimately is an attitude of incredible arrogance!

5. John Wesley's Quadrilateral, in effect, with the addition of culture.

6. You cannot really be said to have the Word of God by isolating one sense of that term from the other. In the fullest sense, the Bible as the written Word

bears witness to the proclaimed Word which centres in Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word. Clearly we want to meet God in Jesus Christ through the pages of Scripture; but this will not be a Jesus apart from the Jesus revealed in Scripture (the alternative is that we tend to recreate Jesus in our own image, one that is accommodating to our viewpoints and prejudices). Evangelicals see the holding together of the meanings of the term "the Word of God" as consistent with the Basis of Union which declares that "The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated." (Paragraph 5) While this might seem to distinguish between the Scriptures and the Word of God (a weakness which evangelicals have always been concerned about), if grammar means anything the Basis says that it is by "the unique prophetic and apostolic testimony" of Scripture that the church's "faith and obedience are nourished and regulated" rather than by the Word of God in some nebulous sense apart from this unique testimony of Scripture. If it was a case of the latter "and" would have been omitted and replaced by a comma after "Word of God". The "and" is significant, linking "by which" with the antecedent "the unique prophetic and apostolic testimony". In this way, while there is no simple equation made between the Scriptures and the Word of God, neither is there a wedge driven between the two as in some contemporary theologies.

7. Accordingly, informed evangelicals have approached the Bible using the tools of historical-grammatical analysis; i.e. taking into account such matters as textual issues, literary genre (or type), historical/cultural background, syntax (or grammatical construction), semantics (or meaning of words), diversity of emphasis between writers, and so on. At the same time they have not been impressed by the more radical historical criticism that has marked much biblical study in the 20th century since the ascendancy of theological liberalism. Evangelical reaction to historical criticism has been mixed. Some have reacted entirely negatively; others have sought to use the tools of such criticism (e.g. source, form and redaction criticism) but apart from the historical skepticism and anti-supernaturalism that has often marked biblical studies in a liberal context. Indeed a number of evangelical scholars have made their mark in biblical studies and their commentaries and other works have been recognized for their scholarship by biblical scholars, evangelical and non-evangelical alike.

Generally evangelicals have not been enthralled by the newer hermeneutical approaches which use more recent methods of literary criticism, such as structuralism (where the text floats free from the author's intended meaning), post-structuralism (with its reader-response hermeneutics where it is the reader who brings the meaning or meanings to the text) and deconstruction (where the text's meaning is always deferred, in a state of flux, if it has any meaning at all). Some evangelicals would see value in some aspects of the newer literary criticism (for example reader-response hermeneutics reminds us that to some extent meaning is a product of the interaction between the reader and the text and that we all do bring certain presuppositions to the reading of the text - but evangelicals would go on to say that in turn our

presuppositions should come under the judgement of the text and be refined, so that a sort of spiralling process of refinement and understanding goes on) but overall the assessment by evangelicals of this type of criticism has been that it is somewhat esoteric and has produced little by way of concrete results.

Evangelicals have been more impressed by aspects of socio-scientific, rhetorical and narrative criticism, which have contributed to a better understanding of the dynamics of the cultures of biblical times and of certain literary conventions (however, one point of concern with regard to narrative criticism has been that the narratives of the Bible are often treated as more history-like than history). But even here there is caution in that what is on offer from such studies often amounts to plausible reconstructions; what we have to work with for sure is the final text of Scripture. Likewise Brevard Child's canonical approach has resonated positively with many evangelicals, allowing for a greater focus on the theology of the whole of Scripture. Whatever their assessment of more recent approaches, evangelicals would insist that the fundamental meaning of the text remains its plain meaning in its original context to be deduced through historical-grammatical analysis and that any contemporary interpretation and application must be consistent with that meaning.

8. Lev 18:22; 20:13.

9. Gen 19:1-13; Judges 19; cf. Jude 7.

10. Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10.

11. Jude 7.

12. E.g. 1 Cor 10:6; 2 Tim 3:16-17.

13. arsenokoitai. Likewise in 1 Tim 1:10.

14. Lev 20:13 - kai hos on koimethe meta arsenos koiten gunaikos... Lev 18:22 - kai meta arsenos ou koimethese koiten gunaikeian...

15. Cf. D.J. Wold, Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East.

16. Cf. T.E. Schmidt, Straight or Narrow?, chap. 4.

17. This has been traditionally understood to refer to going against how God created humanity in terms of male/female sexual differentiation, a differentiation reflected generally in the heterosexual relationships of human society. This links it to God's creation ordinance and society generally and fits with the Bible's overall positive teaching concerning heterosexual marriage. The practice of homosexual intercourse would fly in the face of such differentiation.

18. This is not to say that Paul and his contemporaries knew nothing of a "fixed" homosexual disposition on the part of certain people but it would be

going too far to say they made the modern distinction between orientation and practice. They may not have used the same psychological terms to describe such a phenomenon as people would today but there is ample evidence the phenomenon was known (cf. S. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 84-85).

19.phusis.

20.As others before him in the Jewish tradition had done (cf. NIDNTT, 656-661), Paul takes this Greek concept, particularly reflecting Stoic thought, and links it with the Hebrew concept of God as the one who creates and orders his creation. Indeed Paul uses it again in Rom 2:14 to talk about Gentiles who do not have the Law of Moses doing by nature the things the law requires. Here clearly the reference is not to the individual nature of individual Gentiles but to the God-given propensity in Gentiles generally to have an innate awareness that some things are right and some things are wrong; i.e. it is a reference to a general moral awareness amongst Gentiles. It is worth noting that in his use of this term in Rom 1:26-27 Paul echoes the criticism of Josephus against homosexual behaviour (*Against Apion* 2.273,275).

21.Cf. P. Pronk, *Against Nature*, chap. 4. Pronk rightly points out that the issue here is not really one of exegesis but of the whole interpretative framework one brings to the Bible. In other words, the hermeneutical process (in terms of how one applies what Scripture says to contemporary issues) is determined by attitudes to the nature of the Bible and the role it ought to play in doing theology/ethics.

22.Cf. T.E. Schmidt, *Straight or Narrow*, 65-66.

23.To add to Gal 3:28 "homosexual and heterosexual" would be an inappropriate reading into the text. There is nothing that touches on morality in any of the elements of the text as we have it from Paul. To introduce homosexuality into the text so as to approve of homosexual activity would be to introduce an element which conflicts with Paul's own teaching on morality.

24.For a further discussion of this issue, cf. K. Giles, *Occasional Paper 19: The Abolition of Slavery, Women's Liberation, Homosexual Rights and Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Christian Resource Unit; World Vision Australia, 1995). As Giles points out, the abolition of slavery and the liberation of women are justice issues, to do with the person and their value as a human being, whereas homosexuality is consistently in the Bible a moral issue to do with behaviour. Of course the denial of any basic human rights to a person on the grounds of homosexual orientation (which does not include the "right" to engage in behaviour contrary to what God has revealed concerning the practice of human sexuality) would be a justice issue and ought not to be tolerated.

25.Indeed, I think it fair to say that a number of evangelicals would not have agreed to be part of the UCA had they foreseen that this approach to Scripture would be, in their view, so soon under threat of dilution. For evangelicals the issue at hand is not merely a matter of diverse interpretation

of Scripture so that in the end we can agree to disagree and opt for diversity of approach. Nor for most evangelicals is it a case of homophobia. They see it rather as a rejection of the plain meaning of Scripture; they see it as a push to have the church approve of what Scripture calls sin and what the church for 2000 years has called sin (this is not to deny some exceptions historically or in the contemporary church but to take into account the church's voice overall). In this issue, then, most evangelicals will find it very difficult, I would frankly say impossible, to accept diversity but would rather call the church to obedience to what God has plainly revealed so that its life and doctrine are governed by Scripture rather than contemporary culture. Hopefully it would do this if the issue were one of a group seeking to gain the church's approval of greed or adultery or social injustice as much as in the case of a group seeking the church's approval of the practice of homosexuality. In each instance it would be, in the evangelical view, not a case of accepting diversity but of accepting the authority of Scripture and its plain meaning after careful historical-grammatical exegesis which is consistent with both the tradition and ecumenical voice of the church. They would see the onus of proof as being with those who would set aside the traditional meaning and application of the text; and in the present issue evangelicals are far from convinced that such proof has been presented.