

An Evangelical Response to Keith Dyer's 'A consistent Biblical approach to "(homo)sexuality"'

Context and Introduction

The stimulus for writing this paper was the Baptist Gathering in May 2009. On a Friday evening staff of the BUUV,¹ representatives from various Baptist agencies, and pastors and delegates from the churches gathered to discuss the life of Baptist churches in Victoria, as we do twice annually. During the course of the evening Dr Keith Dyer was reappointed as lecturer of New Testament Studies at Whitley College. He received a very warm and unanimous endorsement by the Council of Whitley College and the leadership of the BUUV and was subsequently accepted by more than two-thirds of the vote. What is notable about this decision was that the Baptist Assembly voted with the knowledge that Dr Dyer both believes and teaches that homosexuality is acceptable before God.²

Now, it is difficult to know where all the BUUV churches stand on this issue, partly because some churches no longer participate in the Assemblies, and partly because some pastors and churches refrain from expressing their view. But it should also be noted that many Baptists are unaware that the issue of homosexuality is a significant one within our denomination.

To our knowledge Keith Dyer's paper, 'A consistent Biblical approach to "(homo)sexuality"',³ is the first academic treatment on this subject by a Victorian Baptist and for this reason alone it deserves thoughtful reading and deliberation. Having read the article we believe it is important for evangelicals to respond in writing, a response that is now even more necessary given the events that transpired that evening in May. Our aims are simple: to inform Victorian Baptists of the current situation, and to provide a response to the position articulated by Keith Dyer.⁴

We appreciate Dr Dyer's candour in outlining his purpose for writing 'A consistent Biblical approach to "(homo)sexuality"'. He writes:

to argue in support of those local congregations that are both welcoming *and* affirming of faithful Christian 'homosexuals' who are already in our midst – or perhaps who have been forced out of Christian fellowship by the church's stand on these issues – and to support the wider claims of justice for all 'homosexuals' before the law.⁵

He concludes his essay with this vision:

I have a dream — pretentious though it may be for me to say it in this way — I have a dream that one day all people may come to value and express (if they choose) their sexuality in accord with the Biblical principles of mutuality, commitment and love, and thereby accept and embrace themselves and each other as God's beloved regardless of their sexual orientation or genital equipment. I have a dream that even though different parts of the church will no doubt continue to disagree on these matters (as also on abortion, divorce and remarriage, women and ministry, slavery, head-coverings, pork and a host of other issues), they will respect each other's right and responsibility

¹ Baptist Union of Victoria

² When we say that Dr Dyer teaches that homosexuality is acceptable, we are referring primarily to his published work (see below).

³ Published in *Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority?* (ed. Brian Edgar and Gordon Preece; Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006), 1–21. It is also available online: <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/20763.htm>.

⁴ For the record, we contacted Dr Dyer prior to publishing this paper online, giving him an opportunity to respond. He did so swiftly and graciously, for which we are thankful. He suggested a couple of minor changes, which we have taken into consideration.

⁵ Dyer, 5.

to ‘bind and loose’ (Mt 16:19; Jn 20:22-23) on these difficult issues, and trust God to reveal the consequences over time. This dream is a thoroughly Biblical dream in upholding the persistent (but never absolute) Divine affirmation of monogamous heterosexual relationships in both Testaments, and in opposing porneia — exploitative, promiscuous, obsessive and abusive forms of sexuality — which the Biblical accounts also never shy away from confronting. This dream is also a transformative one, in that it envisions an even more inclusive gathering of God’s elect — reaching beyond the comfortable norms of blinkered tradition to embrace those who have been made to feel they can never belong.⁶

Our Position

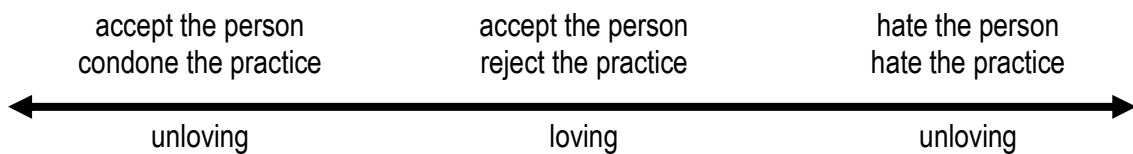
Before we go further in examining Dr Dyer’s thesis, let us briefly outline our own position regarding homosexuality. Sadly, the current debate is often portrayed as having only two positions.



This parody suggests that on the one side are the progressive Christians, those who know and love homosexual people, who take Jesus’ command to love others seriously, and who see the acceptance of homosexual people and homosexual practice as flowing out from their commitment to Christ. On the other side, so the story goes, are the backward fundamentalists, those who sequester themselves in a holy huddle and who most likely do not have any homosexual friends, who value doctrinal orthodoxy over true love for the person, and who are—frankly—homophobic.

If this were the case, then there would be no need to argue further: isn’t it clear to which side we would all want to belong?

But this is a furphy. We believe the picture is more complex, and may perhaps be portrayed in the following way.



For some reason, when it comes to issues of sexuality or spirituality, to be loving towards someone must mean to accept their behaviour without qualification. But there are plenty of examples where this is not the case. Think of the parent who sees their toddler running out into traffic chasing a ball. Or think of a close friend who continues to smoke cigarettes despite knowing the damage they do. In each case we strongly disagree with the behaviour of the person. This does not make us unloving towards them. On the contrary—it is our love for the person that demands we take issue with their behaviour. We warn the toddler of the dangers of running on to the road without first checking for traffic. We gently encourage our friend to think about quitting smoking, and perhaps refer them to people or aids that can help them do that.

⁶ Dyer, 21.

The authors are convinced that the biblical pattern for sexual expression is only within marriage between a man and a woman. As such, we do see homosexual practice as a deviation from God's desire for us, and a harmful way to live. But we strongly deny the charge that this makes us homophobic, or that we view those with homosexual desires with hatred, malice or disdain. Our rejection of the homosexual lifestyle is driven by love. And for this reason we want to distance ourselves from two positions which we see as unloving.

Firstly, we absolutely reject homophobia, the victimisation of homosexual people, and any form of abuse or violence towards them. Condemnation, persecution, ignorance, and fear are all sub-Christian. Compassion for the person without acceptance of the lifestyle of sin was Jesus' approach, and we should all seek to emulate him.

We also admit that some within the church have, tragically, seen persecution and vilification as the "Christian" response to homosexuality, and have done enormous damage to both those struggling with homosexuality and themselves. A current and horrendous example of this is in Uganda where a Bill has been presented before the government allowing for the execution of individuals caught committing acts of homosex. It has been said that this Bill has arisen under the influence of some American missionaries. To what extent this is true we do not know, but whatever the case, such legislation is outrageous and we would call on churches in Uganda to see that this is no way to address the issue of homosexuality in their society.⁷ Even in Australian society where Christians have sinned against homosexuals we need to confess our sin and ask for forgiveness from those we have hurt.

Secondly, however, we find the acceptance of homosexual practice objectionable. We understand the reaction of some Christian people to homophobia. We understand how, seeing the abuse of homosexuals, some Christians have taken what they see as the necessary opposite view: acceptance of homosexual practice, to some degree or other. But, gently and with respect, we want to critique this position as well. What seems to be loving turns out to be anything but. True love for a person wants them to be all that they can be; and in a Christian context this means wanting them to know God and to live His way. This is living life to the full. To tell someone that their sinful behaviour is actually acceptable, and thus to encourage them in sin, is doing them a horrible disservice.

Our fear is that Dr Dyer has taken this second path in his paper. It is for these reasons, then, that we feel compelled to respond, and suggest some shortcomings of his paper as an adequate and appropriate Christian response. To do this there are two things we wish to do. First and foremost, we want to examine his use of the Bible. Second, we want to question what Dr Dyer is saying about human sexuality.

Part One: Dr Dyer's Use of the Bible

We believe this to be the most important part of our paper. Even though Dr Dyer has written about homosexuality, we think it is his use of Scripture which is most concerning. As Bible-believing Christians we turn to the Scriptures to learn what is true, to learn about God, to learn about humanity, indeed to learn everything that we need to know to be His people on earth. So we believe that our primary disagreement with Dr Dyer lies not in the area of sexuality, but in the way we read our Bibles.

What follows are three areas where we have grave concerns about Dr Dyer's use of the Scriptures.

⁷ A response to this which one of the author's wrote is here: <http://mentonebaptistchurch.blogspot.com/search?q=uganda>.

1. Experience over Scripture

As his title suggests, ‘A consistent Biblical approach to “(homo)sexuality”’, Dr Dyer attempts to engage with the Bible on the subject of homosexuality. However it is interesting to note what authority he feels the Bible has. He makes it clear to his readers that although the Bible is important, there is a sense in which it is subservient to human experience:

The attitudes of people are changed not by arguments or exegesis, but by personal encounters with a friend or a family member who is found to be ‘homosexual’ and Christian. After that comes the need for exegesis and reinterpretation, as we seek to understand this new reality in the light of our traditions—just as the early Christians struggled to come to terms with the presence of the Spirit in uncircumcised Gentiles, against all their Biblical expectations.⁸

The first thing to be said is that Dr Dyer’s example of the early Christians does not hold up. He says they ended up accepting Gentile Christians ‘against all their Biblical expectations’.⁹ But was it their biblical expectations that were the problem? Not at all! The disciples’ expectations were not biblical enough, for the Old Testament itself expects the Gentiles to be welcomed in.¹⁰ Rather than their experiences reinterpreting the Bible, their experience needed to be corrected by the Bible.

Moving on, we can agree that everyone comes to Scripture with a mixture of personal history, experiences, ideologies, presuppositions and traditions. But Dr Dyer seems to be going further than this, arguing that the very meaning of the Bible can and ought to change depending on times, cultures, and our experiences. What this means is that human experience—not Scripture—is the greater authority.

This approach to Scripture is fraught with danger. If experience is allowed to trump Scripture then whose experiences do we listen to? Which ones are authoritative? No. This is not the way forward. Our different experiences need to be interpreted by Scripture, not the other way around. Not only that, the Bible’s self-testimony is that life needs to be interpreted in light of Scripture. Here are some examples:

‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path’ (Ps 119:105). It is God’s word that directs our lives, not the other way around.

‘Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction’ (2 Tim 4:2). The word of God preached has a threefold effect on the hearers: correction, rebuke and encouragement. God’s word stands over the Church and influences believers’ lives.

‘For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart’ (Heb 4:12). God’s word is living and active and as a sharp sword it causes radical and deep change in the hearts of those who receive it.

In summary, the consistent approach of believers in the Bible is that the Word has authority over us. Genuine repentance and faith involves submitting to this Word and letting it interpret us and change us. Dr Dyer’s suggestion that we permit human interaction and relationships to overshadow biblical interpretation and application is unwarranted and full of theological, pastoral, and ethical pitfalls, not least on this subject of human sexuality.

⁸ Dyer, 1–2.

⁹ Dyer, 2.

¹⁰ For example Gen 12:3; Isa 49:6; Zech 8:20–23. Of particular note is James’ quote of Amos 9:11–12 at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:15–17).

2. Words of the Holy Spirit beyond Scripture

Not only does Dr Dyer suggest that the Bible ought to be reinterpreted in light of our experiences, he then proceeds to suggest that the Spirit of God has new truths to reveal, truths that at times go beyond and potentially even contradict what the Bible says. This is a serious submission which goes to the heart of so many theological and ethical issues today.

To assume there could be a ‘plain sense of Scripture’ is for Dr Dyer to reduce ‘God’s Living Word to a book of dead letters; immutable laws written in ink, or on stone (2 Cor 3:3)’.¹¹ He goes on to say:

From the beginning, we followers of Jesus have been painfully slow to accept that God’s transforming Spirit has had new things to teach us about circumcision, food laws, ethnicity, the animal kingdom, slavery, the poor, males *and* females, and the environment. To some, the written code about these matters was, and is, crystal clear and absolutely unchangeable. Yet great changes have slowly taken place as Christian communities have taken seriously the power to ‘bind and loose’ (Mt 16:19; Jn 20:22–23) on these issues—to live out what the Spirit of the living God has written on their hearts (2 Cor 3:3)—often in defiance of ecclesial and secular authorities. Despite their human shortcomings, Paul of Tarsus, Francis of Assisi, William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and their like, have lived the way of Jesus and shown us much about ‘God’s-will-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven’. We should at least be open to the possibility that there is yet more to learn and put into practice in other areas too—even including our human sexuality. Heaven knows the church has not handled sex well throughout the centuries.¹²

Let us make three points in response.

First, Dr Dyer uses the language of ‘bind and loose’ to say we can and ought to discern which parts of the Bible are true today and which parts are no longer relevant. The assumption is that the Spirit has new things to teach us and so we need to discern by the Spirit what is dead, immutable law and what are viable living words to the Church today. The problem with quoting Matthew 16:16 and John 20:22–23 is that these are not open-ended, unqualified sayings of Jesus. They have a particular context and frame, namely, the authority of Jesus Christ who rules his Church and his apostles who are then given authority as the foundation of the Church. Far from giving us liberty to pick and choose, the power to ‘bind and loose’ is given specifically to the apostles, and concerns the shaping of the Church under Christ’s Lordship expressed in the apostolic message.

Second, Dr Dyer has misappropriated 2 Cor 3:3.¹³ As the broader context makes clear, in this verse Paul is saying that the Corinthian Church is a living commendation of Paul’s authentic ministry, and therefore he doesn’t need a written letter to affirm his apostleship. This verse has nothing to do with a doctrine of Scripture.

Third, the suggestion that somehow God’s Spirit is revealing new truths beyond the Bible is essential to Dr Dyer’s presentation and yet we believe it goes against the grain of what we learn about the Spirit’s role in revealing God and his plan of salvation. In John 14–17 Jesus teaches his disciples extensively about the work of the Holy Spirit. Please note the following:

- i. The Holy Spirit is sent from the Father and the Son (14:26; 15:26–27; 16:7).
- ii. He is the Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26–27). Already in John’s Gospel the truth has been defined as Jesus (14:6) and the Father’s words are defined as truth (17:7). As the Spirit of truth his representation of God and God’s purposes are true. He does not lie.

¹¹ Dyer, 6.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ ‘You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.’

- iii. The Holy Spirit has a speaking role. He is, however, not a free agent doing and saying whatever he pleases, but as the One sent from the Father and the Son his mission is tied to theirs (16:13–15). Jesus makes this very clear to his disciples.
- iv. The content of the Holy Spirit’s speech is Jesus: ‘the Holy Spirit will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you’ (14:26); ‘the Spirit of truth...will testify about me’ (15:27).
- v. Most scholars agree that in 14:26 and 16:13–15 Jesus is addressing his apostles, rather than the Church at large.¹⁴ After all, when Jesus says, the ‘Holy Spirit...will remind you of all that I have said to you’, this must be addressed to the apostles who were with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Thus, Jesus is not saying that the Spirit will teach us new things, he is teaching his apostles that the Holy Spirit will help them remember, understand and apply Jesus’ teachings. In other words, the Holy Spirit is pointing back to Jesus. On three occasions John shows his readers this divine ‘remembering in action’ (2:22; 7:39 12:16).
- vi. The Spirit’s words to the disciples become what we know as the apostolic message, the New Testament Scriptures. In John 17:6–19 Jesus prays for his disciples, that as men who had been sanctified by the truth, and as Jesus had been sent by the Father, so Jesus sends his disciples into the world. This prayer is immediately followed up by a prayer for all future believers, those ‘who will believe in me through their message’ (17:20). To summarise: God’s revelation comes from the Father and from the Son, it is mediated by the Spirit, to the apostles, about the Son, who in turn are sent into the world. There is no hint that the Holy Spirit will speak words beyond the apostles or in addition to the full revelation of God in Christ.

3. Muddying Clear Waters

Dr Dyer seems to be sceptical that ‘the plain meaning of Scripture’ can be discerned. Of course there are difficult passages in Scripture, but Dr Dyer seems to be saying more than this. It seems that he holds a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’, always doubting and clouding texts that might stand opposed to his position. On the contrary, God is the speaking God. He has given us his Spirit-inspired Word and that same Holy Spirit to help us understand it.¹⁵ The Bible is an understandable book, and yet Dr Dyer leaves his readers pondering whether we can truly understand any part of Scripture, after the meaning of words have become so clouded.

For example, take the meaning of *arsenokoites* (the word Paul uses for homosex in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10). Dr Dyer writes:

The meaning of the word first found in Corinthians and then the Timothy text—*arsenokoites* (‘man-bedder’/‘lying with a male’; the modern terms *arse* and *coitus* are a later development)—is much disputed. The word seems to pick up the Greek translation of the Leviticus texts about ‘men lying with men’, but it can be argued that it carries the added connotation of male prostitution and the economic exploitation of sex rather than ‘homosexuality’ as such.¹⁶

The reality is quite different. There is wide academic consensus on the meaning of *arsenokoites*. In a helpful book, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics*, the Australian Baptist theologian Brian Rosner observes that the word *arsenokoites* was almost certainly coined by early Christians, and conceivably by the apostle Paul

¹⁴ See for example the widely respected commentaries on John’s Gospel by D A Carson and Leon Morris.

¹⁵ The clarity of Scripture does not mean simplicity, it means God’s word is written by God with the purpose of being understood by his people and this understanding is made possible by the Holy Spirit at work in the believer.

¹⁶ Dyer, 18.

himself.¹⁷ Paul is not grounding his theology of homosexuality from the surrounding Greek culture, but finds its basis in the Levitical prohibitions; as Lev 18:22 reads, ‘do not lie with a man...’. So Paul creates a new word reflecting the Old Testament law, *arsenokoites* which means, ‘a man who lies with a man’.¹⁸

A second example occurs when Dr Dyer says ‘the possibility of same-sex relationships is hinted at’ in Scripture.¹⁹ To support this extraordinary claim he cites five passages: 1 Sam 18:1–4; 19:1; 20:30–31; 2 Sam 1:26; and Matt 8:5–13. It might appear there is plenty of support for his argument! But once we start reading these passages, we realise that Dr Dyer has in fact only two relationships to mention, for the first four references all refer to David and Jonathan.²⁰ The fifth and final reference refers to some imagined relationship between the centurion and his servant. Try as we might, we cannot find what Dr Dyer is suggesting.²¹ There is simply no such thing in the passage. In this way Dr Dyer muddies the water and tries to build his case. Frankly, we find this an unworthy technique for a biblical scholar to be using.

There is more that could be said. But we believe these three points are crucial to understand if we are truly going to hear what God has to say to us on this (or any other) matter. First, let us all recognise that the words of Scripture are the final authority in matters of faith. Second, let us take God at his word and trust that these Scriptures are sufficient for us, without turning to supposed new revelations that add to God’s Word. And third, let us plainly put forth what the Scriptures actually say, refusing to give unwarranted credence to fringe-interpretations or the views of radical scholars.

Part Two: What Dr Dyer is saying about Sexuality

Having explained our concerns about Dr Dyer’s use of the Bible, we now turn our attention to the area of human sexuality. As we stated before, we do not believe this is the crux of our disagreement. Instead, sexuality is just one of many areas that we will find ourselves confused and at loggerheads with each other if we abandon a sound reading of the Scriptures.

Dr Dyer helpfully describes for his readers what he believes are legitimate forms of homosexual behaviour. He suggests that ‘Christians may justifiably oppose the aggressive “homosexuality” seen in some aspects of the “Gay” street marches and the promiscuous “homosexuality” that is found in some of the night clubs and bars’.²² But he fervently believes that sexual relationships between two people of the same gender are acceptable and God-glorifying when expressed in the context of ‘consenting and committed adults’.²³ And it is not only the homosexual that he affirms, but also intersexuals and transsexuals.²⁴

¹⁷ Brian Rosner, *Paul, Scripture & Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 119–121. There is only one occurrence of *arsenokoites* that is contemporary with Paul and it is thought that it may be a Christian interpolation anyhow (see the *Sibylline Oracles* 2:73).

¹⁸ The highly respected Greek Lexicon, BDAG, is also at odds with the definition held by Dr Dyer.

¹⁹ Dyer, 7.

²⁰ These passages certainly speak of a deep love between Jonathan and David, but there is no evidence it was romantic or sexualised. The removal of Jonathan’s weapons in 1 Sam 18:3–4 is best understood as part of the covenant Jonathan is making, recognising that David will be the king, not Jonathan. As for Jonathan’s love being ‘more wonderful than that of women’ in 2 Sam 1:26, we need to remember that Jonathan proved to be David’s most loyal friend. David’s wife, Michal, had been taken from him and given to another man (1 Sam 25:44). Even after she returns to be David’s wife again, things do not go well between her and David (2 Sam 6:16–23).

²¹ It seems that Dr Dyer himself is not convinced by this line of argument. In his footnote on page 7 he says ‘See [reference] for detailed arguments in support of this type of interpretation. They push them too far, but still...’ This is exactly what we are taking issue with. This bizarre interpretation is simultaneously written off and yet allowed to speak. If these scholars are truly taking their arguments too far, then why use them to build a case?

²² Dyer, 20.

²³ Dyer, 2.

²⁴ Dyer, 4.

1. A Spectrum of Genders and Sexualities

Dr Dyer argues for a continuum of sexuality, and cites Anne Fausto-Sterling positively who suggests there are in fact five human sexualities.

We are created in God's image as humans (*adam*) 'male *and* female', which is deliberately expressed inclusively rather than as the dichotomous 'male *or* female'. Our human sexuality is a wholistic [sic] continuum, not a bifurcated polarity, and this both reflects the image of God and is in turn reflected in creation by a wondrous diversity.²⁵

Dr Dyer's interpretation of the conjunction 'and' is strained to say the least. While 'and' can denote 'inclusion', it can also firm up distinction. The context in Genesis 1–2 clearly suggests the latter meaning. In fact, an overwhelming consensus of scholars from across the theological traditions interpret the 'and' in Genesis 1:28 as making the distinction between the two sexes: male and female.²⁶ 'And' is functioning to distinguish male and female here as both bearing the image of God, and the following context affirms this understanding with Genesis 2–3 outlining the roles and relationship between man and woman.

To further his case Dr Dyer cites the seahorse and the snail, and for biblical support he turns to the eunuch.²⁷ The passage in question is Matt 19:1–12, particularly verse 12: 'For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven'. Dyer's conclusion is that this is a passage about diverse sexualities, saying, 'Heterosexuality [...] describes the majority of God's created order, but it has never been universal or mandatory'.²⁸

We need to take this interpretation to task. For in this passage Jesus is actually upholding a high view of marriage, calling on men to treat their wives properly, and bringing the Pharisees' "easy divorce for men" into question. In response to Jesus' high ideal and protection of wives, some disciples feel that it might be better not to marry! Jesus cleverly turns their response on its head, saying that, yes, some people will remain unmarried. They won't get married because they were born eunuchs, or they were made eunuchs, or they chose to be eunuchs (ie chose to renounce marriage, 19:12). So in this passage "being a eunuch" is equivalent to "not getting married", for whatever reason. It is not, as Dr Dyer implies, equivalent to "having an alternate sexuality". And it is sad that a passage which is so clearly positive about heterosexual marriage should be used by Dr Dyer to promote alternative sexualities which in fact undermine what Jesus was seeking to preserve.²⁹

2. Long-term, Loving, Monogamous Homosexual Relationships

Dr Dyer says, 'there are, and always have been, faithful "homosexual" Christians in our churches, who do not have the gift of celibacy, and who long to live in a stable, committed relationship with the church's blessing'.³⁰

The argument of 'loving mutual relationships' is a powerful one as it evokes affections desired by all humans, that of needing to give and receive love. The argument goes, 'If they love each other how can

²⁵ Dyer, 3.

²⁶ Including notable scholars such as Karl Barth, Gordon Wenham, and Christopher Ash. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ET Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), 111/4:156; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Dallas: Word, 1987), 33; Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the service of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 274–76.

²⁷ Dyer, 3.

²⁸ Dyer, 4.

²⁹ Dr Dyer's position has more in common with Zeus' anthropology expressed through Plato, than it does with the Bible, *Symposium*: 58–65.

³⁰ Dyer, 10.

we say it's wrong?' But this is strongly misleading. Though love is central to the Christian ethic, 'without further guidelines our attempts to live out a pure ethic of love becomes fraught with potential pitfalls'.³¹ Biblical love is not an unqualified expression, but is directed by and defined by the gospel. Jesus did not tell his disciples to love him in whatever way they saw fit, but 'if you love me, you will obey what I command' (John 14:15). Love conforms to God's purposes in the gospel and takes shape in obedience to God's word; obedience which clearly includes abstaining from sexual activity outside the marriage between a man and a woman. It is the God of love who gives us his words to obey. To disobey the word is to reject love, even if the act is committed in a mutual and committed relationship.

So we do not find this argument for loving mutual homosexual relationships to be persuasive.

3. Porneia

The exegetical strength Dr Dyer's argument hangs largely on his use of the Greek word, *porneia*. He rightly translates *porneia* as 'immorality' rather than 'fornication' (as fornication is but one example of sexual immorality). However he then proceeds to say that 'porneia is sexual idolatry, which becomes manifest in abusive, promiscuous, exploitative and obsessive sexual behaviour: worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:24-32)'.³² There is some biblical truth to this: *porneia* is an example of idolatry, and it *can* be abusive, promiscuous, exploitative and obsessive but it is not exclusively these things.

By reducing the meaning of *porneia* to abusive sexual behaviour, it is easier to affirm some homosexual relationships as they are most often mutually consenting. So when homosex is listed as 'shameful lusts' in Rom 1 Dr Dyer tells us that Paul is not critiquing loving homosexual relationships, but rather exploitive ones—namely male prostitution, a man having sex with a boy. He makes similar appeals with 1 Cor 6:9 and the word *arsenokoites*, saying, 'it can be argued that it carries the added connotation of male prostitution and the economic exploitation of sex rather than "homosexuality" as such'.³³

But *porneia* cannot be reduced to concepts such as exploitation and abuse. A study of the word's use in the Bible makes it clear that *porneia* refers to sexual expressions that lie outside God's design and purpose for humanity. "The word covers "every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse".³⁴ In other words, *porneia* includes any sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

4. Romans 1

We turn now to Dr Dyer's reading of some key texts. Of Romans chapter 1:18–32, he adopts the view that the homosexuality on view 'seems to be that this exploitation of young males by older men occurs when those men have grown weary of promiscuous heterosexual relations'.³⁵ However there is no real exegetical evidence to support this view. On the contrary:

- i. The phrase 'abandoned natural relations' (verse 27) does not mean heterosexuals acting contrary to their nature. The noun *phusikos* is used in both Scripture and Hellenistic Jewish traditions to speak of created order. Neither Paul, nor any Bible writer, differentiates between "homosexuals" committing acts of homosex and "heterosexuals" committing homosex. Homosexual behaviour, regardless of how one might define one's sexuality, is contrary to God's created order, contrary to *phusikos*.

³¹ Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 93.

³² Dyer, 13.

³³ Dyer, 20.

³⁴ Anthony Thiselton quoting BAGD in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 385.

³⁵ Dyer, 19.

- ii. Paul is not speaking about men having sex with boys (or younger males) any more than he is of woman with girls. Paul's language is clearly about men having sex with other men. Textually, it is not one man acting over or against another man, as though exploitive, it is 'with'. There is simply no evidence to support Dr Dyer's exegesis.

Finally, Dr Dyer's suggestion that lesbianism is not on view in verse 26 but bestiality is instead,³⁶ is highly unlikely given the phrase in verse 27, 'in the same way'. The logic is, just as women are having sexual relations with other women, in the same way, men commit sex acts with men.

5. 1 Corinthians 6

With 1 Corinthians Dr Dyer says that what is on view is sexual abuse and exploitation. 'Whether some of the slaves in the Corinthian community were still abused against their will is not clear, but Paul is adamant that sexual abuse and exploitation should not continue to happen amongst the community of the faithful (1 Cor 6:12-20).'³⁷

In verses 9–11 there are ten vices listed and we it is important we read the whole list. It is true that the homosexual offences are given no more attention than any other sin on the list. It is also likely that this list is not meant to be comprehensive. Nevertheless, it is clear that homosexual acts are inconsistent with the Kingdom of God. Therefore, anyone belonging to the Kingdom must not participate in such sin.

There are two words used in verse 9 that relate to homosex. The first is *arsenokoites*, which we've already discussed. The second term is *malakos*, which Dr Dyer rightly defines as 'soft' or 'effeminate'.³⁸ From this he concludes that what is on view in Corinth is prostitution, the *malakos* being the passive partner and the *arsenokoites* being the abuser.³⁹

Paired with *arsenokoites*, *malakos* might be a reference to male prostitution and therefore *arsenokoites* refers to men who pay for homosex, but the terms coupled together could equally refer to both partners in a homosexual relationship. Even if Paul has prostitution in mind here, he elsewhere clearly condemns all forms of homosexual behaviour (Rom 1 and 1 Tim 1:10). Against the idea that *malakos* means boys who were used for sex is the fact that Paul condemns *their* behaviour. If they were simply the victims of sexual abuse would Paul have condemned them? His condemnation only makes sense if they were men of age giving consent to being used for sex.

Before leaving 1 Corinthians let us consider Paul's phrase 'that is what some of you were' in verse 11. One of the beautiful things about our God and his Gospel is that change is always possible. The atoning death of Christ on the cross and his resurrection from the death has such salvific power that by it we are washed, sanctified and justified. We all struggle with sin, and so the chance for real change in our lives should be greeted with great enthusiasm! Note the past tense. Change is possible. This is wonderful news for the Christian, and we are selling our brothers and sisters short if we tell them "you don't need to change" or "you cannot change".

For some who have struggled with homosex this change will be marked, and over time may find their desires shifting, and may even want to marry. Others will struggle to live holy lives even though they may never feel "heterosexual". One thing is certain: we are all called to live holy lives, living in conformity with God's purposes by the power of His Spirit.

³⁶ Dyer, 19.

³⁷ Dyer, 13.

³⁸ Dyer, 18.

³⁹ *ibid.*

6. The Levitical Law

About Leviticus Dr Dyer says, ‘For these reasons we cannot simply affirm, nor blandly dispense with, the Levitical purity codes, either selectively or as a whole. They must be wrestled with and reinterpreted in the light of God’s ongoing and transforming revelation’,⁴⁰ and, ‘we have to re-evaluate each tradition separately, based on the further revelation of God through Jesus Christ’.⁴¹

On the surface both these comments appear fair enough. We agree that the Levitical code must be wrestled with in light of God’s unfolding revelation, specifically in light of Jesus Christ. However, we have already expressed our concerns about Dr Dyer’s suggestion of revelation beyond Scripture. Furthermore, we disagree with his exegesis and application of Lev 18:22 and 20:13.

Dr Dyer has adopted Jacob Milgrom’s novel approach to the holiness code.⁴² Milgrom argues that homosex is banned in Leviticus on the grounds that it undermines progeny; in acts of homosex semen is spilled, thus not giving opportunity for the family line to continue. Dr Dyer says, ‘a more precise understanding of the Levitical problem with male “homosexuality” would be that it is a deliberate avoidance of the responsibility to procreate—a planting of seed (as distinct from a spilling) where it cannot grow’.⁴³

He then quotes Milgrom positively, ‘from the Bible we can infer the following: presumably, half of the world’s homosexual population, lesbians, are not mentioned. Over ninety-nine percent of the gays, namely non-Jews, are not addressed. This leaves the small number of Jewish gays subject to this prohibition. If they are biologically or psychologically incapable of procreation, adoption provides a solution. I hope the Eternal, in love and compassion, will reckon their spilled seed as producing fruit’.⁴⁴ Dr Dyer then asks the question, ‘How then does the Gospel affirm or transform this text?’⁴⁵ As a possible answer, he suggests ‘today’s Church to support the adoption of “unwanted” children by responsible “homosexual” couples’.⁴⁶

Dr Robert Gagnon has written a very thorough critique of Milgrom’s position, and it is worth reading.⁴⁷ In short, Gagnon rightly rejects the exegesis as reductionist. He writes, ‘Milgrom’s fixation on the issue of procreation overlooks the larger issue of which procreation is but a subset for the sex laws in Lev 18 and 20’.⁴⁸ Not only that, this view fails to take into account the obvious: that the Levitical law prohibiting homosex conforms to the pattern for human sexuality established in Gen 1–2, it reflects the consistent negative view of homosex throughout the Old Testament, and it fails to accept Paul’s acceptance of the law’s position on homosex in 1 Tim 1:8–11. Beginning in verse 9 Paul speaks about the right use of the law (remember Paul is writing after Jesus’ death and resurrection): the law was written for ‘lawbreakers’, and in the ensuing list Paul includes any persons engaging in sex outside marriage between a man and a woman (whether heterosexual or homosexual). *Arsenokoites* is the word Paul uses. Such sexual activity is not only contrary to the law, but Paul adds, ‘is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God...’ In other words, the Levitical prohibitions for same sex relations continue under the new covenant.

⁴⁰ Dyer, 8.

⁴¹ Dyer, 15–16

⁴² Milgrom is a well respected Jewish scholar on Leviticus, however his exegesis on the homosex verses are widely disputed.

⁴³ Dyer, 17.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Dyer, 10.

⁴⁷ Robert Gagnon, ‘A Critique of Jacob Milgrom’s Views on Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13’. Online: <http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/homoMilgrom.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Gagnon, 3. He continues: ‘For example, the concern regarding bestiality is that of “mixing” two species that should never be mixed’. Bestiality is not sin because it prevents procreation. It is sin because it is an unholy union between humans and animals.

Conclusion

We felt the need to write this paper in response to Dr Dyer's 'A consistent Biblical approach to "(homo)sexuality"'. We did not do this because we delight in arguing over Greek words. Nor do we relish confrontation. Rather, we are dismayed that a Baptist theologian has shifted so radically from the longstanding Christian consensus on this issue for reasons which are so demonstrably inadequate, and we are even more distressed when the churches of the BUV do not see this as a significant issue. The writing of theology is never a small matter; to write theology is to speak of God, for God, and in his presence. We firmly believe, and hope that we have shown, that the issues at stake here are highly important.

Dr Dyer's essay is based on some very questionable and novel readings of Scripture. This confusion has led to him to write a paper at significant variance with the Bible's consistent teaching on human sexuality. As Christians, and as members of the BUV, we wish to express our concern and opposition to such a position. Readers need to appreciate that Dr Dyer is not calling for churches to change practice in some secondary matter of church polity. On the contrary we believe his argument ends up being, unwittingly, a revisionist position on sin. To call sin acceptable is not only pastorally dangerous, it dishonours God who is utterly holy and who sent his only Son into the world to die on a cross for our sins.

With regards to homosexuality, then, where do we stand? What ought we do as Christians?

We need to remember two truths of the Gospel. First, that Jesus is ready to accept anyone just as they are, no matter what their background. And second, that as Christians we have accepted Jesus as Lord, and so there will be much in our life that needs to change. We are all works in progress after all, and so we need a church community where we are spurring one another on in love and good deeds.

Homosex is sin. But it is one sin among many. The 1 Cor 6 passage mentions 'greed' in the same list of sins. So, how do we respond to sinful people in general? How do we hope brothers and sisters respond to us if we are being greedy and materialistic? How do we respond to our friends who are living with their boyfriend or girlfriend? Do we hate them? Assault them? Slander them and make them feel like second-class citizens? Of course not. Let us love others as deeply and as powerfully as we can. This must mean true friendship and compassion. It will also mean real conversation, and seeking to share the Gospel. The unloving thing to do would be to call sin acceptable, and therefore stay silent about the forgiveness that God is offering them and us.

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