Homosexuality in Scripture

The brief I have been given for this paper is to set homosexuality in the context of God's purposes for us as men and women. The source material I am to draw on is Scripture (the Old and New Testaments, and the approach is to be that of Biblical Theology. This may seem straightforward enough, but there are a number of things that need clarification at the outset if we are not to end in frustrated expectations or outright confusion.

In the previous paper Andrew Shead has noted that in recent theological discussion the term 'homosexuality' is generally taken to refer to an orientation towards members of the same sex, whether or not this is expressed in erotic sexual behaviour. This presents us with something of a dilemma for the present study, because it is now widely accepted that the biblical writers say nothing at all about homosexuality in this sense. They refer to homosexuals acts, but show no awareness of a distinct homosexual condition or orientation. So how shall we proceed? What I have chosen to do is to leave the question of orientation open and to approach this study with the question, 'What does Scripture say about erotic sexual activity between members of the same sex?' I'm prepared to go wherever the scriptural data leads me, but this is my starting point.

But this brings us at once to another issue. To expect Scripture to 'say' something assumes that in some sense it is a coherent whole; that either it speaks with one voice or that its various voices are, in the last analysis, complementary rather than contradictory. This paper assumes that Scripture does indeed have such coherence and that the key to its coherence is Jesus Christ. I take seriously the claim of the Gospel writers that Jesus quoted the Old Testament as the Word of God and maintained that it found its fulfilment in him (Mt. 22:31; Lk. 24:25-27, 44-45). I also take seriously the claim that the apostles (including Paul) were directly commissioned by Christ and that their teaching is therefore fundamentally one with his (Jn. 16:12-15; Gal 1:1, 11-24). The coherence of Scripture is grounded ultimately in the speaking activity of God: 'In many and various ways God has spoke of old to our fathers through the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ...' (Heb. 1:1-2). And finally, God's speaking in Jesus cannot be divorced from his speaking in Scripture. Unless we are prepared to invent our own Christ we must have the one that Scripture delivers to us. And note carefully his words in Matthew 22:31: 'Have you not read what was spoken to you by God?' (citing Ex. 3:6). Jesus is our key to Scripture as he is to everything else.

The implication of this is that in engaging with Scripture we engage with the mind of God, the God who has revealed himself finally in Jesus Christ. To ask what Scripture says about a topic is to ask what God has said about it. And if this is true, it follows that what Scripture says about a topic must control all subsequent deliberations about it by the believing community.

So our aim is to engage with the mind of God in Scripture. But Scripture as it has come to us has a definite shape to it. It moves from creation, through Fall and redemption, to new creation. There is beginning and end; there is promise and fulfilment; there is inauguration and completion; there is complication and resolution, and movement towards a goal. And again, Jesus is key to this whole dynamic structure. He is the link between the Old and New Testaments because in him the Old Covenant is fulfilled and the New inaugurated. And the end towards which everything moves is the unveiling, the revelation of the full effects of what God has achieved in Christ (Rev. 1:4-8). The approach of this paper is that of 'biblical theology' in that it takes this shape of the Bible's theology as given and works with it. The aim is to see in what contexts homosexuality first appears in the progressive unfolding of the
biblical revelation, what perspectives are developed on it, how these are nuanced by the fulfilment that comes in Christ, and by the vision of the new heavens and the new earth to which the whole biblical revelation finally moves.

This means, among other things, that we will need to be attentive to the Bible's own internal hermeneutic. Options which may seem equally valid from reading, say, the Genesis material, will be subject to review and sifting in the light of what we find in the Psalms or the prophets, and further still by what we find in the Gospels and the Epistles. The teaching of Jesus, in particular, will have a privileged status because of his key significance within the total structure. And we will expect the eschaton, as Jesus and the apostles teach about it and as the book of Revelation describes it, to provide us with the final perspective that should inform our present behaviour. Because of its recognition of the key significance of Jesus Christ for the Bible's total message, biblical theology ideally yields a thoroughly Christian appropriation of Scripture, including the Old Testament.

It is clear from all this where we must start, namely, with the foundational material of Genesis 1-3, and in particular with the treatment of human sexuality in these chapters. This is so for several reasons. First, biblical theology, to be truly such, must begin where the Bible itself begins. For us this will not be an absolute beginning because we have already read the rest of the Bible and know where it is going. We already know the plot, so to speak, at least in outline, before we start. But our interest here is not in the main plot as such, but in how a particular issue, homosexuality, is related to the main plot. And we will surely not have a sufficiently clear idea of this unless we have read from the beginning with this particular issue in mind. We also have to begin at the beginning because our chosen method is essentially exegetical. As we have seen in the previous paper there are a limited number of texts which, most agree, explicitly refer to homosexuality. But our aim here is not to use these as proof-texts. Our method demands, instead, that we read up to them and beyond them, noting how they contribute to the broader flow of the biblical message at the points where they occur. That again means that we must begin where the canon begins. And finally, we must begin here because although Genesis 1-3 does not speak of homosexuality as such it lays the groundwork for what will be said about it later.

In the beginning: human sexuality in God's creative purposes

Genesis begins with two complementary accounts of creation. The first (1:1-2:3) describes creation in seven successive days. The creation of man (human beings) in the image of God, is the crowning act of creation, after which comes the rest of the seventh day. In the second (2:4-25) the focus is on the man Adam, and his relationship to the earth and to his environment. Particular stress is placed on his loneliness, and his need of a suitable companion. This account climaxes with the creation of Eve and the union of Adam and Eve in marriage.

Clearly each account has its own distinctive character. Even the order in which things happens differs in the two accounts. In the first, vegetation (grass, trees, and so on) are created before the creation of man. In the second they are created afterwards. But this apparently was no problem to the author of Genesis, nor to the those who transmitted it to us as Holy Scripture. They apparently regarded both these ancient stories as true in their own way, and as complementing rather than contradicting each other. That's why they are simply placed side-by-side at the beginning of the Bible. We need both of them to get the full message about creation that the writer wants to give us.
So let's leave the chronology to one side for a moment and try to understand the messages the
two accounts deliver about God and man, and how they are related to one another and to the
world. In the first account God simply speaks and the world (including man) comes into
existence. He is above and beyond the world, and his word has absolute power. This
account focuses on his transcendence. In the second account God is like a gardener and like
a potter. He plants a garden, fashions man out of the soil and breathes life into him. God is
still in control here, but he is down to earth, deeply and intimately involved with his world.
This account stresses his immanence. The two accounts together tell us that God is both
transcendent and immanent; he is both above and beyond his creation, and deeply involved
with it. He is both in heaven and down to earth.

Two accounts deliver a similar message about man and his relationship to the world. In
chapter 1 he is made in the image of God, and appointed ruler of the world by God. But in
chapter 2 he is a frail creature, made from the dust, intimately connected with the land and
the animals. Man is both lord of his environment and deeply dependent on it. He is related
both to God, who is above him, and the animals, who are below him. He is a creature of
great dignity and frailty.

The point is that we need both the accounts to give us the full picture of both God and man
and their relationship to one another and to the world. At the level of theme or message, the
two stories clearly complement rather than contradict one another. The fact that we cannot
construct an exact chronology of creation from them is beside the point; it was not the
writer's purpose to give us that kind of information.

And now, if we focus particularly on the way human sexuality is portrayed in the two
accounts we will notice a similar complementarity. In the first account man (humankind) is
made in the image of God and given the mandate to rule the earth. But this general
statement is immediately followed by the more particular statements of vv.27b-28: 'male and
female he created them ... and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and
subdue it'. Human beings will be able to rule the earth only if, like the other animals, they
can reproduce themselves and establish their presence everywhere. In this account, then, the
purpose of the male/female distinction within the human race is reproduction.

The situation in the second account is quite different. Here the man, created first, is given a
far more limited task. He is placed in the garden to till it and keep it (v.15). There is no
suggestion that the task was beyond him, or unpleasant in itself. It is only after the Fall that
such work becomes arduous. The problem is the aloneness of the man, and it is this to
which our attention is pointedly drawn by the 'not good' of v.18 (contrast the divine
pronouncements of chapter 1). The woman is then created precisely to remedy this
condition of aloneness. She will be a helper to the man by sharing his work in the garden,
but far more importantly, by sharing his life, by being a companion who will remedy his
aloneness. The climax is reached, to be sure, in the one flesh union of the happy pair (v.24),
but, if the passage as a whole is taken into account, this is an end in itself, not a means to an
end. The purpose of the man/woman complementarity here is companionship, the sharing of
life and work, the removal of aloneness, rather than reproduction as such. That is at best
incidental to the main purpose of their relationship.

Taken together the two accounts deliver the message that the divine purpose of the
male-female polarity within the human race is both reproduction and companionship. And
antecedent to both of these is the dignity inherent in being made in the image of God, a dignity shared by all human beings irrespective of their sex.

Of course, a host of difficult questions emerge at this point, many of them with particular relevance for our topic. The first relates to genre. Clearly what we are dealing with at one level is aetiologies, stories about origins. But are they more than this? Does the fact that God commanded the first pair to reproduce mean that all couples are bound to do so? And is 2:24 purely descriptive ('Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife') or is there an implied command ('.. will leave ...')?

And more fundamentally, what is the relationship between the world of Genesis 1-2 and our world, and between the teaching of these chapters and Christian obligation today? Genesis 1-2 envisages an ideal world in which every man has his female companion. But what happens when, for whatever reason, this is not possible? Are there other remedies for the loneliness of a man which are not envisaged here but are legitimate in the changed situation brought about by the Fall? And what about the loneliness of a woman?

None of these questions can be resolved decisively by subjecting these chapters to more intense scrutiny, although this may help. The fundamental solution to all of them is to read on. Certainly Genesis 1-2 envisages development beyond what is actually realised there. The command to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ places the whole progress of civilisation with its arts and sciences potentially under the rubric of divine blessing. And the command to reproduce entails the development of ever more varied and complex human relationships as human society expands. The question before us in this paper is whether the emergence of homosexual relationships may be seen as a natural or necessary development of the given situation which we have at the beginning.

The Fall: relationships distorted

The fundamental move from the ideal world of Genesis 1-2 to the world as we now experience it is made with the biblical account of the Fall in Genesis 3. After the teaching about the original created order comes an analysis, in chapter 3, of what has gone wrong with it. Again the message is delivered in story form. And what it boils down to is that man has allowed his own desires to rule his life instead of God. He has used the power to choose, which God gave him, to rebel against his maker - to make a god of himself. And he has been encouraged in this course by a being who has already chosen that path before him, represented in the story by the serpent. The chapter ends by telling how, as a result of this choice, man began to experience something new in his relationship with God - judgment. But notice, not only judgment. God thrusts the human pair out of the garden, but confirms his continued care for them by clothing them (v.21). Now, however, they will now have to make their way in a world where struggle, pain and suffering will be a daily reminder of the fact that all is not well between them and their maker.

Again, there are many questions this story does not answer. If the world created by God was good, how is an evil creature (the serpent) within it? How can a serpent talk? Are we meant to take the serpent literally, or is it a symbol for something? If so, what? And what precisely is signified by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? The story answers none of these questions, intriguing though they are. It really answers only one: What has gone wrong with the world? And the answer is crystal clear: the human race has rebelled against God. And it traces that rebellion to its root: pride ('You will be as gods ...'). Everything
else is irrelevant to the writer. That is the message he wants to deliver, and the account he has given delivers it with devastating clarity.

Chapters 4-11 unfold the full impact of that original act of rebellion. Now that the most fundamental relationship of all has been fractured (man's relationship with God) all other relationships begin to fall apart as well. Even religion becomes a source of human rivalry and murderous jealousy. Brother kills brother, violence and immorality fill the earth, and finally, in the account of the tower of Babel of chapter 11, a humanistic civilisation emerges whose very first principle is defiance of God.

It now becomes clear that the Fall, too, points beyond itself to much else. The original act of rebellion was singular and uncomplicated: the host of evils that follow it are complex and various. But they all grow from the original act as from a single seed, and they all receive the same basic response from God: judgment - tempered with mercy. A protective mark is placed on Cain, Noah is told to build a boat. Only in the last episode, the tower of Babel, is no mercy evident. Human society is thrown into utter confusion and scattered over the face of the earth. A terrible silence hangs over the scene. It seems like the end. The human race has reaped the full reward of its rebellion. God has withdrawn; judgment has been his final word. But no, a new movement begins in ch.12, as grace breaks through again in the call of Abraham: 'in you all families of the earth shall be blessed' (12:3).

It's now quite clear that not everything that follows after the original created order of Genesis 1-2 can be seen as legitimate or approved developments from it. The act of rebellion in chapter 3 gives rise to a whole new category of human activities which come under the general rubric of rebellion against God. And a consistent pattern of divine response to such acts is beginning to emerge: judgment, tempered with mercy. Homosexuality has not yet appeared, but there are now two potential categories into which it could fall.

But before going further we must pause to reflect more closely on the impact of the Fall on the relationship between the original human pair. In the pronouncement of judgement following their disobedience their relationship is described in terms of desire (hqv;Wvêt) on her part, and rule (lvm) on his. The terminology itself does not have any necessarily negative connotations. Lvm, for example, has been used in chapter 1 of the beneficent and life-giving rule of the sun and moon (1:16). But the context here in chapter 3 strongly suggests that something less positive is on view. The desire and rule language comes in a judgment speech, immediately preceded by pain and followed by thorns and thistles. At the very least something less seems to be on view here then the rapturous oneness of the pair at the end of chapter 2. More ominously still what is said here anticipates the recurrence of the same terminology in 4:7, where Yahweh is warning Cain about the consequences of his anger:

If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; its desire (hqv;Wvêt) is for you, but you must master it (lvm).

We know the result. Instead of mastering his sinful desire he was mastered by it, and the result was a total breakdown in his relationship with Abel, leading to death. It's clear from this that Genesis draws a sharp distinction between pre-Fall and post-Fall relationships. The former are part of the good, created order of things. The latter are part of the disordered state of affairs resulting from human disobedience and divine judgment. Disorder in relationships, including sexual relationships, results from the refusal of human beings to live
according to the limits and permissions given by God.

The Fall produces disorder in sexual relationships. Neither the desiring of the woman nor the ruling of the man is wholly good; their companionship is now marred by conflict. The woman still knows herself to be a woman and the man knows himself to be a man. They are conscious of their nakedness (3:7). The man and the woman each retain their sexuality identity as God created it. But the way they express it is no longer wholly good, as it had been before the Fall.

Sodom: all boundaries crossed

It is not until Genesis 19 (the rescue of Lot from Sodom) that we first encounter homosexual behaviour directly. This must, or course, be understood against the backdrop of the earlier chapters. But first to the details of the passage itself, and since they are so similar to those of Judges 19 (the Levite and his concubine in Gibeah) we will deal with both passages at this point.

In the first, Lot entertains two angels in Sodom. From the way they are greeted and referred to we must assume that they have the form of adult males. At night the men of Sodom gather outside Lot's house and noisily demand that he bring his guests out to them so that they may 'know them'. Lot is shocked at this affront to his guests. He offers to give them his two virgin daughters instead, but the offer is refused. The men of Sodom are angered by this attempt by Lot, a mere sojourner, to 'play the judge' by meddling in their affairs. They attempt to force their way into the house but are prevented from doing so by Lot's guests, who strike them with blindness.

In Judges 19 a Levite and his concubine, who are staying overnight in Gibeah, are entertained by an old man who is himself a temporary resident. When confronted with the same demand as Lot, this host offers the men outside his own virgin daughter and his guest's concubine. They refuse the offer, but when the Levite thrusts his concubine out anyway, they 'know her' and abuse her all night, leaving her all but dead.

In his influential book published 1955, D. Sherwin Bailey denied that the verb 'know' in the initial demand in these narratives had any sexual connotation. He found only fifteen examples of 'know' in this sense in the Old Testament, against more than nine hundred in its primary, non-sexual sense, and argued that the context in both passages fully justified the normal, common meaning of the word. The host in both narratives is a foreigner (ger) who has just received other foreigners without consulting the local inhabitants. They are demanding to know who these strangers are, and the host is protesting against the discourtesy to his guests which such a demand involves. The sin of the men in the street is boorish hostility to foreigners rather than sexual perversion. In the incident recorded in Judges they do later engage in perverted sex, but it is heterosexual rather than homosexual.

In reply, Derek Kidner has rightly pointed out that the statistical argument carries little weight. If matters such as this could be settled by statistics the rarer sense of a word would never seem probable. It is the context which must decide the issue. And the disputed word 'know', certainly is subsequently used in its sexual sense both stories. In Genesis 19:8 the host has two daughters who have not 'known' man, and in Judges 19:25 the men in the street 'know' the Levite's concubine. This does not require that 'know' have the same meaning at every point; there could be a deliberate play on it. But it certainly calls Bailey's
argument into serious question. The host, in both stories, apparently understands the demand to be for sexual gratification. But, against Kidner, it is strange that the homosexuals in the second narrative (if that is what they are) behave like heterosexuals when given the opportunity to do so. The fact of the matter is that there are problems with both the proposed readings.

For Kidner, the matter is clinched by the reference to Genesis 19 in Jude 7: 'Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities ... acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust'. In terms of the general approach of this paper appeal to a relevant New Testament passage in these circumstances is quite legitimate. But the precise meaning of the verse in question is not clear enough to be decisive. The previous verse, which refers to 'the angels that did not keep their proper position' is almost certainly an allusion to the passage in Genesis 6:1-4 about illicit relationships between the sons of God and the daughters of men. That passage, too, is a thorny one. But Codex Alexandrinus has 'angels of God', and early Jewish and Christian commentators agree that what is on view is a transgression of the boundary between the divine and human realms, angels consorting with human beings. It is this traditional interpretation which is reflected in Jude 6 (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4-6; 1 Pet. 3:19-20). This being so, the 'unnatural lust' of verse 7 (literally 'going after strange flesh') probably refers, not to homosexuality as such, but to the fact that 'the sin of the men of Sodom ... reached its peak when they sought intercourse with the angels sent to Lot'. The issue is not homosexuality as such, but a general state of immorality, both homosexual and heterosexual, which reached such extremes that it threatened to transgress the boundary between the human and the divine, as in the days before the Flood. In short, there can be no simple equation drawn between 'unnatural lust' of Jude 7 and homosexuality, and consequently appeal to this verse does not settle the issue in the way Kidner thinks it does. Homosexuality per se is not the primary issue in either of the two Old Testament narratives in question. On the traditional and most probable reading of them, the demand to 'know' the visitors in both cases is a demand for sex. But the general atmosphere of violence suggests that, if we are to narrow our focus to the sexual-behaviour aspect of each narrative, the perversion involved is rape rather than homosexuality as such. And if homosexual rape is condemned in the first passage, heterosexual rape is far more clearly condemned in the second. In short there is an allusion to homosexuality in these two passages, and it occurs in a context of judgment on human sin. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was 'very grave' according to 18:20. But exegesis does not indicate that homosexuality as such is the issue. What is condemned is demanding to 'know' people, actually 'knowing' them, or handing them over to others to be so 'known', without their consent. It is the sin of using people sexually without regard for their dignity as human beings.

But now that we have grasped the exegetical nettle it is time for some more general observations.

First, the sexual sin of the Sodomites is part of a more general state of disorder, including inhospitality, xenophobia, and violence. 2 Peter 2:7-8 sums it up as licentiousness and lawlessness (RSV). We have focussed on the sexual aspect only because of the terms of reference of our study.

Second, in its canonical context the sin of Sodom falls against the backdrop of Genesis 3. It is a further outworking of the disorder in human relationships that results from human rebellion against God. It has its root in the Fall and in its most extreme form is an assault on God himself, represented in the story by his two messengers.
Third, it is not the sin of pagans only, but also of the people of God, as the parallel in Judges 19 makes very clear. For the place involved there is 'Gibeah of Benjamin', an Israelite town. The same point is made more subtly in Genesis. Lot may be better than the Sodomites (2 Pet. 2:8 calls him a 'righteous man'), but he is not untainted by their sin, especially in the final stages of his stay there. If we read the account carefully we will see that not only is Lot in Sodom but Sodom is in Lot. Under pressure, he offers his own virgin daughters to the men of Sodom, and he himself is eventually sexually abused by those same daughters (19:8, 30-38). He leaves Sodom, but takes its sin with him. The fact is (to use New Testament terminology) that the sin of Sodom is in the church as well as in the world.

Fourth, the sin of Sodom meets with the same response from God here as we have seen earlier in Genesis: judgment (the overthrow of the city) tempered with mercy (the rescue of Lot). But the judgment here is so catastrophic that, along with the Flood, it becomes a paradigm of divine retribution for generations to come (see Is. 1:9-10; Hg. 2:21-22). And in in the longer perspective of the Bible's theology it is an anticipation of the final judgment (Jude 7). God has served notice on the world (both pagans and his own people) that such behaviour will not go unpunished. In Judges 19-20 it is punished by a civil war in which the whole of Israel suffers, and the Benjamites in particular are 'handed over' by Yahweh to be virtually wiped out by the other tribes (20:28-48).

Finally, if homosexuality as such is not the issue in these passages it does not follow that they approve of it, still less that Scripture as a whole does. Our inquiry is far from over yet. What it does mean is that we should not use these passages as proof-texts against homosexuals and fail to see their relevance to heterosexuals.

Sexual taboos: Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

With Leviticus we move from narrative to material that is directly prescriptive. We now find ourselves in the world of command and prohibition. The 'statutes' of the pagan nations (18:3) are set in stark contrast to the 'statutes and ordinances' of Yahweh (18:4-5), which are collectively his 'charge' to Israel (18:30). The same terminology is used in chapter 20 (vv. 8,22,23). To fail to keep Yahweh's charge is to 'defile' both oneself and the land (18:20,28), and to 'profane' Yahweh's name (18:21), by committing 'abomination' (18:22), 'perversion' (18:23) and 'wickedness' (20:14). The penalty is to be put to death (by stoning or burning), and to be cut off from the community by Yahweh (20:2-3,5,6,9-16). It is in this context that we find the two prohibitions of 18:22 and 20:13

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

Although it is disputed, there can be little doubt that this is a general proscription of homosexual intercourse. The only serious objection to this, as indicated in the previous paper, maintains that the term 'abomination' (hb:le/T) is a cultic term, and therefore it is cult prostitution rather than homosexual intercourse of the common kind that is on view. But while 'abomination' is commonly used of cultic offences, especially in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel, is is also used on non-cultic offences, as frequently in Proverbs. And in Leviticus itself it is not used at all outside chapters 18 and 20 - the very passages in question. So there is no established cultic usage in Leviticus to constrain our reading. The matter must be
settled contextually, and on that basis the ordinary, non-cultic sense is strongly indicated. The single, blanket prohibition against homosexual intercourse in 18:22 is the counterpart to the whole string of heterosexual taboos which have preceded it, none of which suggests a cultic context (not with your mother, not with your sister, not with your grand-daughter, and so on). The fact that no such specifics are given for homosexual relationships makes it clear that it is homosexuality as a whole that is being proscribed. Specification is superfluous. The situation is the same in chapter 20. The only clearly cultic prohibition is against offering children to Molech (v.21; cf. 20:1-5). But this is probably included here precisely because of the moral outrage that it involved; the children were almost certainly burnt. The language of defilement in verses 27-28 too has cultic connotations. The land is Yahweh's sanctuary; if it is defiled it will no longer be a fit place for him to dwell with his people. But the previous use of the same language in connection with adultery in the same passage (v.22) makes it clear that it is moral rather than cultic defilement that is primarily on view. The defilement of the land here results from the moral defilement of its inhabitants.

Homosexuality, then, is a moral issue in Leviticus, along with incest and adultery. In this respect chapters 18-20 in general contrast sharply with chapters 11-15 where the commands and prohibitions relate entirely to matters of ceremonial purity: clean and unclean foods, the ceremonial purification of women after childbirth, the cleansing of lepers, and instructions regarding bodily emissions. Cultic and ceremonial matters come to the fore again in chapters 21 and following, but in chapters 18-20 the focus lies elsewhere.

The reason given for the prohibitions of chapter 18 is simply that the specified acts are abhorrent to Yahweh ('abominations' is his word for them). It is because the former inhabitants of Canaan practised such things that Yahweh punished them by driving them out (v.24). To explain the prohibition against homosexuality in terms of a state of paranoia on the part of the author regarding all things Canaanite is to simply ignore (or still worse dismiss out of hand) the theology of the text. The biblical writers in fact suggest that Israelites in general were strongly attracted to Canaanite ways; the divine prohibition cut across their natural inclinations. The positive motivation for the prohibition is given in the opening and closing words of the larger unit in which they occur: 'I am Yahweh your God' (18:2); 'You shall be holy ... for I Yahweh am holy' (20:26). Israel is in covenant with Yahweh, and must reflect his character in her relationships. Abstinence from things which are abhorrent to Yahweh is a necessary expression of her relationship with him.

This already points us to a much larger theological context. But in order to appreciate it fully we need to pause at this point to note the special contribution of chapter 20. Here basically the same catalogue of prohibitions occurs as in chapter 18, but this time with the penalty specified, which in most cases, including homosexual intercourse, is death (20:1-16,18). Chapter 20 forces us to grapple with the theology of retribution in Leviticus, and especially the theology behind the death penalty.

The broad concern of Leviticus is how the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel which has been given formal expression in the Sinai Covenant (Ex 19-24) is to be maintained, given the frailty and sinfulness of Israel. The answer is fundamentally by the mercy of God expressed in the sacrificial system: 'the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I [Yahweh] have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls' (17:11). The general principle is that all sin deserves death. The one who sins against Yahweh forfeits his life. But Yahweh in his mercy will accept the life of a sacrificial animal in place of the life of the sinner. So in Yahweh's dealings with his people the accent falls on mercy
rather than judgment. Unwitting sins are provided for in the sacrificial system (4:2,13). But deliberate sin places the offender beyond the reach of this provision, and therefore subject to the death sentence. This is implicit in Leviticus, as the language of 4:2,13 ('sins unwittingly') makes clear. It is spelled out quite explicitly in Numbers 15:27-30. Against this background it appears that the offences listed in Leviticus 18 and 20 were deemed to be deliberate by their very nature and therefore required the death penalty. But as the test case given in 19:21-22 makes clear, care was taken to protect the innocent in cases involving special circumstances.

But the ultimate ground for the death penalty lies in the Creation/Fall material of Genesis. Death is first threatened (2:17) and then imposed (3:19) by God as the ultimate sanction against human rebellion. The general principle is the same as in Leviticus: those who rebel against God forfeit their lives. The sentence is universal and put into effect by God himself. But after the Flood, for the first time, this is brought into the arena of human judicial responsibility: 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image' (Gn. 9:6). Murder is a capital offence because it is a direct assault on the created order established by God, in which man, made in his image, functions as his representative. In their canonical context the prohibitions and penalties of Leviticus 18 and 20 move against this background as their raison d'etre. And so once again we are driven back to the foundational material of Genesis 1-3. The Sinai Covenant must be seen as a particular expression of the relationship between God and the world implicit in creation itself, and incest, adultery and homosexuality as violations of the created order.

And with this we have virtually exhausted the relevant Old Testament material. Given the acknowledged fertility orientation of Canaanite religious rites, the 'male cult prostitutes' (RSV, Heb. vdEq;) of 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12,22:46, and 2 Kings 23:7 (cf. Dt. 23:17) were probably used by women rather than men, and in any case, there is nothing in these passages to offset in any way the general strictures of Leviticus.

The Gospels: the dawn of a new era

The Gospels form the bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Because of this they are crucial to our topic, even though, paradoxically, they contain no direct reference to homosexuality. It is in the Gospels that the new, Christian era is inaugurated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What we have here is fundamental to the way we are to both appropriate what has gone before and approach what is to come. In particular, what we are to do with the Leviticus material depends foundationally on what the Gospels have to say concerning Jesus and his attitude to the Mosaic law.

An obvious starting point is Matthew 5:17: Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. The key word, 'fulfil' (plhρων), may mean, among other things, to accomplish, to obey, to bring out the full meaning, to complete by bringing to a goal. In Matthew it is most commonly used of bringing to realisation something that was promised. This sense is reinforced here by reference to the prophets. But 'the law and the prophets' is a regular Jewish expression for the OT as a whole (cf. 7:12; 22:40; Acts 24:14; 28:23; Ro. 3:21). So the whole of the OT, the law as well as the prophets, pointed forward to what Jesus now brings into being. To see precisely how he does this we have to read on.

Jesus fulfils the law in his teaching. He not only upholds the commandments relating to murder, adultery, divorce, false witness, retribution, and love of neighbour, but insists that
they may be broken as much by wrong attitudes as by wrong acts (Mt. 5:21-47). The food laws he effectively abrogates, only to expose the deeper issues of cleanliness and defilement of which the ceremonial prescriptions were but shadows (Mt. 15:15-20; Mk. 7:14-23; cf. Mt. 5:8). He treats the Sabbath with a freedom that shocks the rigorists of his day (Mt. 12:1-14), but only after he has invited them to find in him their true rest (11:28-30). In short, Jesus intensifies the moral dimension of the law. As for its ceremonial aspects, he exposes the moral and spiritual realities to which they point and demands response to these as the true form of obedience. And he summarises his teaching about the law with an absolute demand ('Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect, Mt. 5:48) and a concise summary (Love God and love your neighbour; 'on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets', Mt. 22:36-40).

Second, Jesus fulfils the law in his living. He himself embodies the perfection which mirrors that of the Father. And as for love of neighbour, he regards all people, regardless of their sinfulness or social standing, as potential candidates for inclusion in the kingdom of heaven. He is the friend of publicans and sinners. There are no untouchables for him. In fact his most stringent criticisms are of the self-righteous and hypocritical who withhold love from such people. At the same time, however, he calls for repentance. This call is fundamental to his preaching and is directed to all alike (Mk. 1:15). Even those he refuses to condemn he urges not to sin again (Jn. 8:11; cf. 5:14).

Finally, Jesus fulfils the law by his death. As 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1:29) he is the final and perfect sacrifice which makes further atonement unnecessary. By taking the death penalty himself he ransoms others (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45). By his death he inaugurates the new covenant (Lk. 22:20; cf. Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24) which makes permanent, universal forgiveness possible (Lk. 24:47). The only sin which now places the one who commits it beyond the reach of forgiveness is the refusal to accept what is offered (Jn. 3:16-36). In Jesus both the mercy and judgment aspects of the law reach their goal. He is God's full provision and his final offer.

With this framework we may now give our attention to some aspects of Jesus' teaching which have more particular relevance to our topic.

Given that, in general, Jesus' teaching on sexual matters is more stringent than that of the Mosaic law, the lack of any explicit mention of homosexuality can hardly be taken as an implicit endorsement of it. The prohibition against it in the law belongs to the same category of commandments (moral) that he repeated and intensified rather than those (the ceremonial) which he abrogated. It stands in close proximity to the prohibition against adultery in both chapter 18 and chapter 20 of Leviticus (18:20,22; 20:10,13).

Further, in his teaching on divorce Jesus points to Genesis 2 as normative. The Mosaic law made concessions because of hardness of heart, 'but from the beginning it was not so' (Mt. 19:8). This confirms that the Mosaic legislation was intended, in general, to reflect the created order as represented in Genesis 2 and prevent violations of it. Jesus teaching gives fresh expression to this.

There is an intriguing reference in Matthew 19:12 to eunuchs 'who have been so from birth'. The context is Jesus' quotation of Genesis 2:24: 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife' (v.5). The disciples object that if divorce is to be ruled out in the new order of things which Jesus is bringing in, then it is better not to marry (v.10).
Jesus responds that, in general, marriage is God's intention for people, but that there are exceptions: this 'word' concerning marriage cannot be received by all, 'but only those to whom it is given' (v.12). He then proceeds to list those to whom it is not given. In general, it is not given to eunuchs, but these are of three kinds: those who have been eunuchs from birth, those who have been made so by men, and those (like Jesus himself) who have, so to speak, made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. The first two groups are incapable of marriage; the third group have voluntarily renounced it.

Several things need to be noted here. 'Eunuchs from birth' refers to a condition for which the person concerned is not responsible. Comparison with 'eunuchs who have been made so by men' suggests that it is essentially a physical condition which is on view, though it would inevitably have secondary psychological aspects. And it would appear to involve an incapacity for sexual intercourse as such rather than an orientation towards same-sex intercourse. It is unlikely, therefore, that there is any reference here to homosexuality as a congenital condition. Finally, although the tone of the passage is clearly sympathetic to the plight of the eunuch, the only alternatives entertained are heterosexual marriage or sexual abstinence, by either necessity or choice.

But what hope, then, does Jesus offer to those to whom the satisfactions of marriage are not given? The first is that, provided they have made themselves ready by believing the gospel, they will be included in the final marriage between Christ and his people (Mt. 25:1-3; cf. 9:14-15). And second, that in the entirely new order of things that will then come into existence, they will experience a quality of relationships that will utterly transcend what they have missed out on in this life; for 'those who are accounted worthy to attain that age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage ... for they are equal to the angels and are the sons of God' (Lk. 20:35-36). Paradoxically, the final marriage will totally obliterate the distinctions that have previously existed between participants and abstainers, the married and the unmarried. In terms of biblical theology, we begin with a marriage between a man and a woman, and we end with the marriage between Christ and his church. The end is not a return to the beginning, but a movement to something which transcends it (Rev. 9:6-10).

In the Gospels, then, we catch a glimpse of the end to which the biblical revelation is moving, but we are not quite there. The epistles have yet to spell out the full implications of the gospel for Christian living.

The epistles: life in the last days

In Romans 1 Paul is laying the foundations for his generalisations in chapter 3: 'all men ... are under the power of sin', and 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (vv.9,23). He is establishing the guilt of all only that, having done so, he may then go on to speak of the justification that is available to all as a gift 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (3:24). More particularly, from 1:18 onwards, Paul is intent on showing how 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men', that is, how God, even now, displays his anger by judging sinners in observable ways. The fundamental way is by giving them up to dishonourable passions (v.26). The past tense of verses 24, 26 and 28 ('gave them up') is best understood in relation to the individuals concerned ('those who do such things', v.32). Such people show by the very extent of their depravity that the restraining hand of God has been removed from them. Paradoxically he has judged them by giving them over into the grip of the things they themselves have chosen - things which are
destructive by their very nature. Hence they receive 'in their own persons the due penalty of their deeds' (v.27). It is in this context that reference is made to homosexuality:

Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men ... (vv.26-27).

Erotic sexual activity is being referred to. The acts are same-sex and passionate, and for the first time we have female as well as male homosexuality on view. This much is clear. But certain expression require comment before we move out again to the wider issues of the passage.

The activities involved are said to be 'unnatural' (paraخوفين, v.26). These are contrasted in this verse and the next with opposite gender sexual relations, which are said to be 'natural' (فسیکه). And the whole discussion moves against the references to creation in verse 20 ('the creation of the world ... the things that have been made'). So فیسیل, 'nature', in this context clearly denotes the world as God has made it, the created order. Paul has something more in mind than custom, the mores of a particular society. He is appealing to what, in terms of the Bible's own theology, is prior to all culture; the will of God for human relationships expressed in the way he made us 'from the beginning' (Mt. 19:4). Again we are are back at Genesis 1-2.

But what of the verbs 'exchanged' (metτάλαβαντες, v.26) and 'gave up' (اجتهدی, v.27)? Certainly they indicate wilfulness, a theme which is strongly reinforced by the context. Those who do such things 'know God's decree', but deliberately choose to violate it (v.32). Further, the verb 'exchanged' in verse 26 recalls the use of the same verb in the previous verse: 'they exchanged the truth about God for a lie'. And this in turn harks back to v.23: 'they exchanged (اجلَّاَلَّاَسْ) the glory of the immortal God for images'. So the choices of verse 26 are manifestations of a more fundamental choice. What the persons concerned have 'exchanged' or 'given up' is God and his order for human relationships, in favour of their own alternative pattern of relating. It is homosexual behaviour as such which is condemned, not merely conversion to it by people who were formerly heterosexuals.

And finally, 'consumed with passion' (v.27). This expression emphasises the completeness with which those who engage in the acts described are in the grip of their own desires, And they are so because they have been 'given up' to those desires by God. The desires themselves are 'dishonourable' and the acts to which they give rise are 'shameless'. The verb 'consumed' (σχάδισθηκαίμαι), with its connotations of self-immolation, anticipates the explicit reference to self-inflicted judgment which follows (v.27b). Further, in view of the wider framework of thought, it is not possible to limit the reference to only one category of homosexual activity: acts which are lustful and irresponsible rather then committed and loving. In terms of Paul's own thought the passions and acts he speaks of are dishonourable, not because they are they are unloving but because they are unnatural. They represent sexual desire indulged outside the framework of the created order. Again, it is homosexuality in general which is condemned here, just as it is idolatry in general which is condemned in verses 20-25.

With these particulars in mind we are now ready to widen our focus again. How do these references to homosexuality relate to the broader framework of Paul's thought in the opening chapters of Romans?
It should be noted, first of all, that homosexuality as such is relatively incidental to the argument of Romans 1 as a whole. The principal sin here, the root from which all else flows, is idolatry, the refusal to acknowledge God as creator and to give him the honour which is his due (vv.18-25). The movement is from the description of idolatry, to a general statement about sexual immorality (v.24), to homosexuality in particular (vv.26-27), and then to a catalogue of other moral offences (vv.28-31). So Paul does see a close connection between idolatry and sexual licence in particular; other kinds of moral evil are a less direct consequence of it. In this his thought is closely aligned with the Wisdom of Solomon, especially 14:12: 'The invention of idols is the root of immorality'. But it would be unnecessarily restrictive to limit his reference to simply to the immorality practised in the name of religion in the various pagan cults. Like the author of Wisdom, Paul sees idolatry as a source of moral corruption that blights the whole of human life. Sexual immorality is mentioned first as the link between the cultic and non-cultic spheres, not to limit its reference to the former. The fact remains, however, that homosexuality is one of a long list of evils here, and there is no suggestion that it is worse than the others.

The more fundamental affinity, however, is with the Law, and specifically with Leviticus 18 and 20. There, as we have seen, homosexuality, like adultery and incest, is part of what it means to be 'like the nations'. Here it is part of what it means to be pagan, an idolater. And in both places, if our analysis has been correct, the theological basis of what is being said lies in the foundational creation material of Genesis 1 and 2. Although the rhetorical purpose is different, the basic stance towards homosexuality is identical. Fundamentally, the biblical view about the legitimacy or otherwise of homosexual behaviour does not change from the Old Testament to the New.

There is a recognition in verse 26 that homosexual acts arise from an underlying condition: 'dishonourable passions'. But in the overall logic of the passage this condition arises from rejection of God. There are larger issues here. There are already hints, in the reference to creation, that Paul has the long view in mind: the fall of the entire human race in Adam, not just the rejection of God by individuals. He will spell this out explicitly in 5:12-14. And if this is so there must be a sense in which the state of mind which gives rise to the acts is inherited. There is a sense in which the individual is predisposed to such acts by birth into a race that has already rejected God. But such predisposition, in Paul's mind, does not excuse the acts themselves. Each individual must choose between the lusts of their heart and God's decree which prohibits their indulgence (v.32). Furthermore, if there are specific 'passions' that give rise to homosexual acts, there are also 'lusts' that give rise to sexual immorality in general (v.24), and 'a base mind' which gives rise to murder, slander and the other evils listed in verses 28-31. In other words, in Paul's thought, a predisposition towards homosexual behaviour does not make it any more excusable than a predisposition to adultery or murder.

Finally, all of this must be set in the context of Paul's rhetorical purpose. His aim is not to single out one particular group as worse sinners than others, but to establish that all alike are guilty. He clearly sees humanity as consisting of two groups: Jews and Gentiles (2:9-10; 3:9) and he does not underestimate the differences between them. The Jews have the law and the Gentiles don't. But his point is that at the most fundamental level they are both the same. He begins with a generalisation ('all ungodliness and wickedness of men', 1:18) and ends the same way ('all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin ... all have sinned', 3:9,23). In chapter one the focus is on the Gentile world, in which idolatry is the cardinal sin. But then in chapter two he turns his attention to the Jewish world, where the cardinal sin is self-righteousness. Paul's argument in Romans 2 is that the Jews, who have
the law, have not in fact kept it, and are therefore just as guilty as the Gentiles they condemn. Indeed, they are more so because of the greater privileges they have had (2:24; 3:1). It is his hard and impenitent heart that condemns the Jew (2:5). His condemnation of others is a cover for his refusal to face up to his own sinfulness.

Paul, of course, was well qualified to speak on this subject because of his own impeccable past record in Judaism (Gal. 1:13-14). Like Jesus, he saw sins of the spirit (especially pride and hypocrisy) as just as damning, or more so, than sins of the flesh. If he is hard on homosexuals in chapter 1, he is even harder on those who self-righteously condemn them in chapter two. But his ultimate purpose is not to induce hopelessness or self-loathing in either. Quite the contrary. In the longer perspective of Romans his purpose is to establish the guilt of all only in order to show the relevance of the gospel for all (3:23). His argument revolves around two principles: God's wrath (his just judgment on sin) and his righteousness (his activity of putting people right with him). The latter is put into effect objectively by the saving sacrifice of Christ, and subjectively by a response of faith. Paul insists that we acknowledge sin as sin, our own as well as others'. We have all sinned; that is the judgment we must accept if we are to know the joy of forgiveness. So paradoxically, the denunciation of homosexual behaviour in 1:26-27 is part of a general indictment which opens out into a message of hope. And the hope perspective which is developed doctrinally here is sustained in the more directly pastoral material of the letters which follow Romans in the canon.

Although it has been denied, can be little doubt that Paul refers specifically to homosexual behaviour in his list of vices 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Do not be deceived; Neither the sexually immoral (povnai) nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes (malakoiv) nor homosexual offenders (ajrsenokoi'tai) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (NIV)

Of the two relevant terms, malakoiv and ajrsenokoi'tai, the latter is particularly transparent, reflecting closely the LXX of Leviticus 20:18 (cf. 18:22): 'Whoever lies with a male [meta ajrsenoi koithn] as with a woman, they have both committed an abomination'. The order, two, is the same as in Leviticus: first prohibited heterosexual acts (adultery) then homosexual behaviour (Lv. 18:19,22; 20:10,13). The other term, malakoiv (singular malakoiso) raises more complex questions. Its literal meaning is 'soft', and in the LXX and the NT (apart from here) it is used only of things - a soft tongue (Pr. 25:15), soft words (Pr. 26:22), soft garments (Mt. 11:8; Lk. 7:25). But in classical authors of the first century BC to the third century AD it is also used as technical term for boy prostitutes. Philo is particularly harsh on youths who dress themselves as women for such purposes, and describes such degeneracy as malakia. It could be, therefore, that Paul has this particular practice in mind in his use of the term here. But there are a number of considerations against this. The first is the fact that it is linked here with ajrsenokoi'tai, for which no such technical usage is attested. The second is the general nature of the other vices in the list: idolatry, adultery, drunkenness and so on. Each indicates a broad area of misconduct rather than a specific subcategory. And finally, there is the connection with Leviticus, with its proscription of homosexuality in general. Apart from the specific connection via ajrsenokoi'tai, there is the broader connection via the Judaism in which Paul was raised.

In view of all this it seems best to follow C. K. Barrett in taking malakoiv and ajrsenokoi'tai as complementary terms, intended to cover the full range of homosexual behaviour. malakoiv, via its classical usage, has connotations of passivity; receptivity to homosexual advance. ajrsenokoi'tai, via Leviticus, has more active connotations ('lie with
a man as with a woman’). They are therefore lend themselves very well to the kind of complementary use which I am suggesting. If this is so, Paul takes the same basic stance towards homosexuality here as in Romans 1, and there is a similar association of homosexuality with idolatry, and with sexual immorality in general (v.15; cf. Ro. 1:24-27). But the form and direction of his argument is quite different.

In Romans 1-3 Paul was working with the fixed categories of Jew and Gentile. Here in 1 Corinthians 6 he is operating with the fluid categories of the unrighteous and the saints (v.1). As the opening verse of the chapter makes clear, ‘the unrighteous’ is not fundamentally a moral term, but a technical term for unbelievers (v.6), those who still belong to the old, fallen order of things, which Paul calls ‘the world’ (v.2). The moral evils of verses 9-10 are characteristic of the unrighteous, but they are symptoms of their condition rather than the essence of it. The list is not an exhaustive one, and the items in it do not amount to a definition. What ultimately defines the unrighteous is their unbelief, their solidarity with the world rather than the kingdom of God. In contrast to them are ‘the saints’, those who have been washed, sanctified and justified in the name of Christ and the in the Spirit of God (vv.1,11). ‘Saints’ is not fundamentally a moral term either, but a technical term for believers, people who have been transferred into the new order of things by the gracious work of God for them and in them rather than by their own moral effort. The good news is that it’s possible to pass from one category to the other: ‘such were some of you, but you were washed ...’. The warning is that, in the last analysis, one's standing in Christ is inseparable from behaviour. The Corinthians must take care not to be deceived (v.9); those who behave like the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Saints must behave like saints, and it is their behaviour, in the long term, that will reveal those who are truly saints and those who are not. In Romans 1-2 Paul was concerned to show that Jew and Gentile are fundamentally the same, and how all alike need to be justified by faith in Christ. Here he is concerned to show that the saints and the unrighteous, those who have been justified and those who have not, are fundamentally different, and to challenge the Corinthians to exhibit that difference in their behaviour.

With that broad picture in mind, there are several things to be said about the significance of the reference to homosexuality in this passage.

First, it occurs within a framework of eschatology. Romans 1 moved against the background of the first things, creation and fall. 1 Corinthians 6 moves against the backdrop of the last things, the coming kingdom of God, and this raises the stakes very high. Some will inherit the kingdom of God; others will not. In this context the issue of homosexual behaviour takes on a new urgency. The choice to persist or not to persist in it has eternal consequences.

Second, it is mentioned in close association with 'washing', 'sanctification' and 'justification', 'in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of our God'. Verse 11 is full of terms which, in one way or another, refer to the process of renewal which has now entered its final phase through the work of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. Homosexual activity is mentioned in a context where change is on the agenda. And not not simply moral reform, but change of a far more radical kind, effected by God himself.

Third, homosexual behaviour is mentioned as characteristic of 'the unrighteous' (v.9), that is, those who are not yet regenerate. It is an aspect of solidarity with 'the world' (v.2), or in terms of Leviticus 18 and Romans 1, part of what it means to be pagan. At once, however,
we must remind ourselves that it is only one of many such characteristics. Greed, drunkenness, and many other things are equally symptomatic of the same condition (vv.9-10).

Fourth, homosexuals, no less than other sinners, are potential candidates for regeneration. 'And such were some of you' (v.11) makes it clear that 'the unrighteous' is not a closed category; exit from it is possible, and the Corinthians themselves are living proof of this. They have been washed, sanctified and justified in the name of Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Finally, regeneration necessarily entails forsaking the kinds of behaviour listed in verses 9 and 10, including homosexual behaviour. The whole rhetorical thrust of the passage is aimed at establishing this point, as we have seen.

One last passage remains to be considered before we draw this study to a close. We have already concluded that the expression 'unnatural lust' in Jude 7 does not refer to homosexuality as such but to men consorting with angels. This leaves us with 1 Timothy 1:8-10 as the last apparent reference to homosexuality as such in the canon:

> the law is not laid down for the just but for ... immoral persons, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

'Sodomites' here translates the same term, ajrsenokoivtai, that we have just met in 1 Corinthians 6, and the same strong connection with the Law is evident both from the word itself and from the context in which it occurs. The reference to 'genealogies' and 'teachers of the law' in verses 4 and 7 make it all but certain that 'the law' which Paul has in mind is the Law of Moses. The list of vices in these verses is a catalogue of acts which were understood in rabbinic thought to be either directly or indirectly proscribed by the Law. Paul not only recognizes that the Law prohibits homosexuality, but endorses this Law as 'good' (v.8). In this Paul is in complete agreement with the 'teachers of the law' he has just mentioned.

He does have a serious disagreement with them, however, and this brings us to the heart of what this passage is about. The men Paul is in dispute with do not use the law 'lawfully', that is, in accordance with its true nature and purpose (v.8). This is then explained in verse 9: the law is not laid down for 'the just', but for 'the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane'. And it is the term 'sinner' which is picked up in what follows: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners, but I obtained mercy ...'. 'Sinner' is what Paul was; 'just' is what he has become. We must conclude therefore, that in Paul's thought here, the 'just' person is not so much a morally upright, respectable person as a pardoned sinner. This pardon is made available through the work of Christ (v.15) and is received by faith in him (v.16). The message that announces this is 'the glorious gospel of the blessed God' with which Paul has been entrusted (v.11). In Paul's thought, the law is not in conflict with this gospel. Indeed, the types of behaviour which the law categorises as wrong are contrary to the 'sound doctrine' to which Paul himself is committed, doctrine which is 'in accordance with' the gospel, not contrary to it. How then do Paul's opponents misuse the law? They do so by directing believers to it as the resource (indeed the only resource) they need for a godly life. In so doing they deflect attention from the gospel of grace with its transforming power. For Paul the law is the handmaid of the gospel. For his opponents the law is everything.

Paul agrees with his opponents, then, that homosexuality is wrong. The law of Moses stands
as an uncompromising witness to this fact. But this is something that Paul affirms almost in passing. The main thrust of what he is saying lies elsewhere. 1 Timothy begins and ends with grace (1:2; 6:21). The aim of Paul's charge is 'love' (1:5), and there is a strong note of 'hope' that runs through the whole letter: 'Christ Jesus our hope' (1:1), 'our hope is set on the living God' (4:10), 'eternal life' (1:16; 6:12), 'the life to come' (4:8), 'the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ' (6:14-16), and 'the future ... life that is life indeed' (6:19). It is worth pausing to mark carefully this strong note of eschatological hope, since it is so often overlooked in discussion of the Pastoral Epistles. The gospel is a message of hope for sinners, and Paul knew that if it had so transformed his own life, there was no sinner beyond its reach. The bedrock on which it rests is the faithful saying if 1:15, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners', and the goal towards which it points is 'the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ' when hope will be consummated in the 'the life to come' (6:14; 4:8).

It is on this note of hope that the Bible makes its last reference to homosexuality.

The book of Revelation: the final triumph of God's purposes

At the end of the Bible, as its beginning, there is no explicit reference to homosexuality. There is a strong affirmation, however, of God's sovereignty as creator. The last three chapters of Revelation are replete with many references to the opening three chapters of Genesis: the final destruction of 'that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan', the tree of life, the river of life, the abolition of death and the lifting of the curse. The message is plain, God's original purposes in creation will be achieved. The created order will not only be maintained, but perfected, and every challenge to it finally be put down. The key to this outcome is Jesus Christ, who is both redeemer and judge. The dominant note is one of celebration, but it is judgment as well as salvation that is celebrated, for both alike express the truth that God reigns. The question for his creatures is whether or not they will acknowledge this fact. The chilling list of 'outsiders' in 21:8 and 22:15 is a sad reminder that some will defy God to the end and reap the terrible, and eternal consequences of their choice. But even here the Bible maintains its balance. Settled opposition to God can be evidenced as much by faithlessness and lying as by sexual misconduct, and even this is referred to only by general term pornoi ('sexually immoral person'). The final warnings of Scripture apply as much to heterosexual sinners as to homosexual ones.

Final reflections on Genesis 1-3

The consistent position of Scripture is that homosexual acts are morally wrong because they are contrary to the revealed will of God. His will is revealed explicitly in the Law of Moses, and the sexual ethics enshrined there are unequivocally endorsed by Jesus and the apostles. But whenever this explicit command of God is referred to, there is nearly always an underlying allusion to creation. That is, the Law simply makes explicit what is implicit in creation itself. What the biblical writers do not do, however, is unpack this basic theological datum. They do not reflect on how the biblical accounts of creation embody the will of God for human sexuality. It may be legitimate and even necessary for us to do this, but we must recognise that we are engaging in a form of argument which is our own, and not that of the Bible itself, and therefore any conclusions we come to must be tentative. With this caveat in mind I offer the following theological reflections.

What is it to be human?
The fundamental relationship in Genesis 1 is the relationship between God and man (humankind), not the relationship between man and woman. To be human is to be made in the image of God, and in terms of the data which Genesis 1 provides, this means to be a creature addressed by God and therefore responsible to God. The male-female polarity is introduced to enable humankind to fulfill the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it, but it is not the essence of what it is to be human. That's why our identity as human beings can never be found in our sexuality, and why sex can never be redemptive. Our identity lies in our relationship with God, and redemption consists of restoring that relationship. It also explains the strangely 'sexless' view of heaven which we find in the New Testament. The end of redemption is not sexual fulfilment but something that transcends it.

What is it to be man and woman?

The division of humanity into man and woman has important consequences for our self-awareness and potential for development as human beings. Given that we derive our identity as human beings ultimately from God, nevertheless a man knows himself to be man only in relation to woman, and a woman knows herself to be woman only in relation to man. Man cannot fully develop his proper identity and potential as man unless he recognizes his complementary dependence on woman, and woman cannot develop her proper identity and potential as woman unless she recognizes her complementary dependence on man. Man cannot be fully man by relating only to men, and woman cannot be fully woman by relating only to women. Complementarity and mutual need must be fully accepted if we are to be men and women as God intended us to be. The 'one flesh' union between a man and woman in marriage is the most intimate and perfect expression of our 'man-ness' and 'woman-ness' that is possible. To make any other form of sexual expression ultimate is to deny our true identity as men and women.

Can the procreative and unitive functions of human sexuality be separated?

Much depends on this. If the two functions can be separated, or if sex itself can be separated from either or both of them, then all kinds of activities become legitimate. Reflection must surely begin with the fact that we have two complementary creation accounts in Genesis and that human sexuality is only part of the total picture that they present. They deliver their message about human sexuality in exactly the same way that they deliver their message about God (transcendent and immanent) and man (made in the image of God, made from the dust of the ground). The complementary ideas that they present are separable conceptually, but not practically. They are two aspects of the one indivisible entity. The same is true of our sexuality. Its procreative and unitive functions can be separated conceptually, but they cannot be divorced in practice without doing violence to the God-given character of human sexuality itself.

It should be remembered, however, that Genesis 1-2 is much more about relationships than sex as such. The main requirement is that sex take place within a relationship in which both the procreative and unitive aspects of human sexuality are accepted as God-given and the responsibilities that they bring are accepted. Homosexual behaviour divorces sex from procreation; casual sex of whatever kind divorces it from its unitive function.

Which is primary: the procreative or unitive function?

This is a difficult issue to resolve, mainly because the primary biblical data is ambiguous.
One could argue that procreation is primary because this is what is highlighted in the first account of creation. Genesis 1:1-2:3 sets the basic framework for the discussion of human sexuality; the unitive aspect of sex, a second order issue, is then explored in 2:4-25. On the other hand, one could argue that the account of the 'one flesh' union of the man and the woman is the climax of the total presentation of God's creative activity which spans Genesis 1 and 2 as a whole, and therefore the unitive aspect of sex is primary.

Dogmatism is entirely out of order here, but there are several considerations which make the second option the more likely one in my judgment. The marriage of 2:18-25 is the highpoint of human wellbeing as willed and brought about by God, from which the fall of chapter 3 then takes place. Further, the procreative aspect of sex is something that human beings have in common with the animals. This is self-evident of course, but particular attention is drawn to it in Genesis 1 by the double occurrence of 'Be fruitful and multiply' in verses 22 and 28 (with reference to animals and human beings respectively). In contrast to this, the one flesh union of man and woman in Genesis 2 is presented as something conferred by God on the human pair alone, and something which sets them apart from the animals. And finally, it is the unitive aspect of human sexuality which receives special emphasis in the teaching of Jesus. Note, for example, Matthew 19:4-5, where 'he ... made them male and female' (Gn 1:27) is followed immediately by 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother' (Gn 2:25). That is, the primary purpose of the male-female distinction is the one flesh relationship of marriage. Procreation is normally possible only in the first half of such a relationship, but the relationship itself is intended to be life-long, and the unitive function of the relationship, rightly understood, is not in the least diminished by the loss of procreative capacity.

We may reasonably conclude, then, that the unitive function is primary. It does not follow from this, however, that homosexual marriage is a legitimate option, because the 'one flesh' unity of Genesis 2 is predicated upon the male-female difference between the partners, and even in the post-Fall situation, no other kind of marriage is ever countenanced by Scripture.

Is homosexuality natural?

In biblical terms, the difference between 'natural' and 'unnatural' has to be understood in terms of the effects of the Fall on the created order. The Fall does not render everything unnatural. Much that happens after it, including the proliferation of the human race and the emergence of arts and crafts, is entirely in keeping with what was anticipated in creation itself. Such things are 'natural'. But the Fall introduces another category of things which stem from human rebellion against God and are contrary to his will for human life as expressed in the created order. These are 'unnatural'. The Law of Moses specifies many of them and indicates clearly that they are to be rejected as unacceptable patterns of behaviour. The contexts in which homosexuality appears in the Scriptures places it firmly in this category. It is an expression of our fallenness rather than our createdness. This rules out in principle any talk of a homosexual condition as 'the way God made me'. It may be part of the way I am, even part of the way I was born, but it is not how God intends me to be. It is something to resisted with God's help.

Isn't love the ultimate moral criterion?

In Genesis 1 God's word orders the physical realm. He speaks and gives the world its shape, separating waters from waters, sea from land and light from darkness. In chapter 2 he speaks
again and orders the moral realm. He tells Adam what he may and may not do. He separates right from wrong. It's within this context of God's authoritative and powerful speaking that human sexuality comes into existence and finds its proper character and role. It's goodness (and the text is very insistent that it is good) arises from the blessing and command of God which brings it into existence and orders it according to his will. It is not love which is ultimate, but the word of God. And this same principle is maintained throughout the Bible. Love is never divorced from obedience.

In emphasising love for God and neighbour as the two great commandments, Jesus and his apostles did not discard all other commandments. On the contrary, Jesus said 'if you love me you will keep my commandments', and Paul wrote, 'Love is the fulfilling (not abrogating) of the law'. Love needs law to guide it. ... Love is concerned with the highest welfare of the beloved. And our highest human welfare is found in obedience to God's law and purpose, not in revolt against them.

Creation, Reemption, and community

The creation accounts point strongly to the fact that God wills us to live in community rather than isolation. The procreative aspect of sex leads naturally to all the complex human relationships which comprise human community and belongingness: parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and comrades. The man who is 'alone' is in a condition that is 'not good' (Gn 2:18), and one of great need. This need is recognised by God and met by the provision of a wife, and ultimately of family, clan, people and nation. Human beings cannot realise the good that God intends for them alone. Wholeness is possible only in community, of which marriage is the basic institution.

We, of course live in a world that is sadly changed from that of Genesis 1-2. For many people marriage is not possible, and a strong homosexual tendency, whatever its cause, is undoubtedly a significant factor in some cases. The love which God commands us to have for him and our neighbour demands that we recognise the needs of such people and actively seek their good. And this can finally be achieved only by being loved and incorporated into Christ and his people. Where homosexual behaviour is involved, repentance will be required, as it is for all sinners, but love precedes repentance rather than being a condition for it: 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'. The final outcome of the redemptive process which God puts into effect after the Fall is a community of loving obedience in which all may find acceptance by grace. The truth is that we are all sinners, and our true identity is not 'homosexuals' or 'heterosexuals', but human beings, made in the image of God, fallen, but still loved by God, and (if we will have it so) his sons and daughters through Christ.