

Matters of personal sexuality



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The aims in publishing this booklet include:

- To provide information and promote careful thought on the difficult and complex issues surrounding gender and sexuality
- To encourage personal reflection on these matters
- To suggest ways in which we may offer both compassion and support to those who come to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender or questioning about their sexuality.

The subject matter of this booklet is difficult, and the preparation of these notes has led to much prayer, soul searching and rigorous debate amongst the editorial team. Through this process, we have come to more fully understand the diversity of humankind and the complexities of individual lives. But above this, we have each gained a heightened appreciation of the need for compassion for one another and also the love, mercy and forgiveness God offers to us, evidenced by the example set by our Lord.

It is accepted that the Bible makes it clear that any form of sexual intimacy, other than in the context of a monogamous heterosexual marriage, is not what God intended nor desires. That said, throughout scripture we see repeated examples of God working with and within the context of human frailty, with individuals in far less than 'ideal' relationships.

Some of the following thoughts may be considered stretching, possibly even controversial, but our prayerful hope is that they will stimulate discussion within our individual ecclesial communities which may be helpful whenever the need arises.

Contents

1. Introduction..... 4

2. Who is this booklet for? 5

3. Biblical principles..... 5

4. A view of the present situation 8

5. A view from history 9

6. Towards a greater understanding..... 10

7. People are different 11

8. What form of thought and behaviour is sin? 14

9. Other relationships and the Bible 17

10.If you are unsure about your gender or sexuality..... 22

11.If you are clear about your gender or sexuality 24

12.A challenge to *all* of us 26

13.Some further difficult and challenging questions..... 28

14.Concluding thoughts 29

Notes..... 31

Appendix 1: Parenting responsibilities and challenges. 33

Appendix 2: A consideration of the sin of Sodom 34

Appendix 3: What is LGBTQ? 35

This booklet is the work of individual Christadelphians, informed by the insights and comments of some of those impacted by these matters and is endorsed by the CSN Committee.

1. Introduction

There is a real need for this booklet.

Parents and ecclesias are becoming increasingly aware that our children and teenagers are growing up in a generation, and in a societal and educational environment, where sexual and gender equality is legally enforced, expected and promoted. We may also have a growing awareness that in reality human sexuality is a complex matter, where the previous apparent certainties of religious and secular opinion may need to be re-evaluated.

As a result many people are questioning the established attitudes to sexual diversity derived from an understanding of Bible teaching on sex and sexuality and the way that we, in our individual ecclesial communities, treat those, both within our community and those with whom we come into contact who are sexually different.

When we seek to educate our young people, talk privately or speak in public on what we believe to be Bible principles, we must ensure that what we say is Christ-like and reflective in its nature and neither condemnatory nor inflammatory. This requires us to be aware of the nuances of scripture, recognising that the Bible does not set out a 'league table' of sins, teaching rather that *all* sin is sin stemming from separation from God, and that no one sin is worse than another (though consequences in our personal life may be). We must also be aware of current discrimination laws and attitudes to sexuality. As a result, we need to be both sensitive and sympathetic in the language we use and principles we express.

We also need to recognise the genuinely complex nature of this subject and the very real issues faced by those individuals whose sexuality is different from that of the majority.

When working with children and young people (i.e. those under age 18) in Sunday school, youth work, youth weekends and camps, we have both a legal and moral responsibility under both safeguarding and charity governance plus other legislation to avoid 'discrimination abuse' and to be sensitive to the detrimental effect that unguarded, uninformed and unkind words and actions may have upon vulnerable young people, adults and others. (Note 1: see page 31)

Whatever we may initially assume, these issues are also highly relevant within our own ecclesias. Through its ongoing work within our community, the Christadelphian Support Network (CSN) is regularly made aware of the distress, emotional hurt, trauma and long-term detrimental impact that has been caused to vulnerable individuals by the lack of insight and empathy, and even outright condemnation, from within our fellowship towards those within what is known as the LGBTQ community (Note 2: see page 31). The impact of these attitudes has included several attempted suicides by vulnerable people distressed by the apparently unsympathetic actions and behaviours displayed towards them from some within our community.

2. Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is for everyone. Its aim is to inform, support and encourage all readers on this challenging but topical subject, and to promote compassion and understanding of the complex issues which matters of personal sexuality are raising for individuals, families, and for our community.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide information and promote careful thought on the issues of gender and sexuality

You may be reading this booklet with a specific person in mind, to seek a greater understanding and awareness of their feelings, which may include emotional turmoil, a sense of isolation and the deep longings that can arise in issues of human sexuality and relationships.

Perhaps you are reading this because at some time you have been unsure about your own sexuality, or because you know someone who is LGBTQ, or you may know someone who is struggling with their sexuality or issues about relationships and sex. These matters go to the very root of our humanity, a humanity which marks us out as individuals, unique and special in the eyes of God.

3. Biblical principles

It is not the purpose of this booklet to deal exhaustively with the Bible's principles on sexual intimacy, but rather to provide practical support to those challenged by sexual matters, whether as individuals or as those with

Matters of Personal Sexuality

a responsibility to lead. The Bible makes it clear that any form of sexual intimacy, other than in the context of a monogamous heterosexual marriage, is not what God intended or desired. That said, throughout scripture we see repeated examples of God working with and within the context of human frailty, with individuals in far less than 'ideal' relationships.

The Bible acknowledges all aspects of human frailty, labelling them equally as sin. Every form of sin is covered, from what we might regard as the 'lightest' instance of coveting to the darkest act of murder. Extremes of behaviour seen in the life of David, who was nonetheless described as:

a man after God's own heart 1 Sam 13 v14 and Acts 13 v22.

We should note that the Bible does not focus on any specific sin. All sins are equally contrary to God's will and commands and we are each encouraged to try our utmost to live our lives as sons and daughters of God. This is a challenging ideal, which only our Lord Jesus Christ was truly capable of fulfilling. However, despite our human frailties, each of our sins can be forgiven and put behind us (Note 4: see page 31) because the biggest of scripture's themes is God's desire for relationship with us.

Despite our human frailty, this is made possible through his loving grace, mercy, forgiveness and, ultimately, the redemption granted to all who seek to follow Christ's selfless example in their own lives. This is available whatever we have done or have thought of doing in the course of our individual lives.

God created men and women in different forms, bringing wholeness to each other by their relationship. Humankind was not intended to exist in isolation as individuals, but together and in community to show care and compassion for each other, to love each other as Christ loved the Church and laid down his life for it. This is the divine pattern: of individuals in relationship with God, with each other and as a community of believers, different but in unity, appreciating and supporting one another. Without this the worst aspects of human nature may take hold. Marriage and sexual union should also demonstrate this principle.

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Matters of Personal Sexuality

Clear instructions were given to Israel in the Law of Moses concerning all aspects of life, including hygiene and personal behaviour. Included in this were strict guidelines on sexual intimacy. Yet this was at a time when the Bible acknowledged that even the leaders of the nation had more than one wife, and sometimes concubines, thus departing from the principle set out in Genesis 2.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul lists as sin the sexual practices prevalent in his generation and amongst the cultures of the time, including adultery, prostitution, homosexuality and sexual immorality, along with the full range of other human failings – drunkenness, robbery, greed, idolatry to name but some (1 Cor 6 v 9-11). All were serious, yet all could be forgiven with repentance.

Whilst the follower of Christ is not under the Law of Moses, the Apostle Paul illustrated very precisely (Romans 1) how our human nature can lead us into selfish thoughts and behaviours. Sin demeans us, making us less than our best. We are no longer exactly as God intended or wants us to be. Because of our individual selfish choices and the sinfulness which often results from them, we can separate ourselves from God and find ourselves ‘given over’ to our selfish human desires.

Again, Paul lists many of the behaviours that can result from a sense of separation from God. So that is the challenge we all face – to be transformed in our individual thought, behaviour and lifestyle from self-centred to selfless individuals, this by means of the love of God and his Son, our love for others and informed by our knowledge of God’s will and principles. That remains our highest potential and goal, in God’s sight.

It has been argued that sexual sin, in terms of relationships and sex outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage, should be treated differently from other sins, in that these matters may be ongoing in nature and hence the individual’s repentance from them is questionable. Yet each of us is conscious in our own lives of repeated sins of many kinds, and scripture provides us all with the assurance that, no matter how many times we fail, forgiveness is always available. No individual sin is beyond forgiveness (Note 4: see page 31), even when these sins are repeated. No individual, whatever their nature or temptations, is beyond the reach of Christ’s love.

The Bible confirms that our lives should not be an individual journey. As a community of believers, and in our own personal relationships, we are asked to support and encourage each other in our respective transformations, however hard some of our individual trials and temptations prove to be.

No individual, whatever their nature or temptations, is beyond the reach of Christ's love.

This booklet seeks to help and encourage, individually and as a community, in that context.

4. A view of the present situation

In 2016 the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that approximately 2 per cent of the UK population over the age of 16 identified as homosexual, lesbian or bisexual, which equates to just over one million people. Many of us know or are aware of family, friends or acquaintances amongst them. The ONS noted that most of these people were recorded as single and living alone and the percentage identifying as homosexual, lesbian or bisexual was higher in the 16-24 age group. This could be because younger people are more open about their sexuality than older generations, or it may reflect genuine changes in society. In the past there was less openness and more ignorance about these matters, both in society and the churches and about the individual lives impacted by them.

In recent years the results of scientific and medical research, and perspectives raised by campaign groups, have increased our awareness of the full spectrum of human sexuality and relationships. Equality legislation now prevents discrimination on gender and sexuality grounds and promotes fairness in the treatment of those previously regarded as 'different'. Homosexual acts were illegal in the UK until the law was changed in 1967, though it's worth noting that lesbian behaviour was never illegal. In March 2014 same sex marriage was legalised in England, Scotland and Wales although, at the time of publication of this booklet, is not so in Northern Ireland.

These changes in society's views and attitudes, however justified, present many challenges to established understanding of scripture and the resulting formal religious opinion on sexuality. They also provide an opportunity for followers of Christ to review for themselves the spirit of

the relevant scriptures which have provided the basis for these established religious attitudes, and to consider how they choose to respond to those impacted by these matters in recognition of the grace and forgiveness shown by God to all his children.

This is a challenge currently facing us as individuals and our community as a whole: *can* we learn to respond with sensitivity and insight to LGBTQ issues, both to those within our community, and to those we will meet in our witness and outreach activities? Surely, we each need to reflect on these real issues, and try to show a Christ-like spirit to all we meet in whatever circumstances. Do we need to question ourselves and our established attitudes to see whether our views are as scriptural and ‘Christ-like’ as we would hope?

It would be wrong to consider issues around human sexuality as solely 21st century preoccupations. For as long as men and women have existed, sexuality and relationships have presented dilemmas and challenges both to those of faith, and to society in general.

5. A view from history

Early cultures and Bible sources record same sex and alternative sex relationships in honest detail, which defied the confines of ‘normal’ monogamous heterosexual marriage. Some are condemned by scripture, but others, for example polygamous relationships, are not. In the ancient Greek and Roman cultures (the world of the early Christians) same-sex relationships were known of and accepted, particularly in literature and the arts. While for many of us same sex issues have become a ‘touchstone’ of current morality, our Lord Jesus Christ is not himself recorded as instructing anything specifically about homosexuality, although he was clearly aware of it, as we know from Matthew 11 v 24 in his reference to Sodom (see Appendix 2). He did however comment on other aspects of sexuality - divorce, lust and adultery, setting the highest standards of morality in his teaching but acting with compassion to all with whom he came into contact - most notably to those regarded as ‘sinners’ by others.

6. Towards a greater understanding

In the beginning, Genesis sets the scene for us. Man and woman were created 'in the image of God'.

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1 v 26-27

While it is recorded that God made them 'male and female', we are increasingly aware that this phrase in its literal sense does not describe the full spectrum of human gender, nor those born of indeterminate gender (known as intersex and historically as hermaphrodites). It represents all people, each created in his image and likeness by God. So, what does it mean to be 'created in the image and likeness of God'?

We are encouraged that, although made in that image, it is still our life's purpose to grow *into* the likeness of God. This implies change, or transformation as the New Testament puts it, from one way of thought to another, from the self-centred mind of separate individuals, intent on providing for their own needs and desires, into the selfless mind of Christ, who saw within each individual the potential to serve God and to be in relationship with him.

Note that being made in the image and likeness of God did not result in uniformity. Creation is both wonderful and diverse. Men and women are equally wonderful and diverse, in their physical form, colour, culture and character and, as we have come to realise, in their sexuality.

Individuals can be in different places on this spectrum of sexuality

We now know that men and women are on a spectrum of gender, which stereotypically ranges from the extremes of a tough aggressive male to a mild, gentle female. Distributed between these two extremes are many of us: men with degrees of gentler female characteristics and women with some stronger masculine characteristics. Sexuality too, is on a spectrum. Yet each of us is created in the image and likeness of God.

7. People are different

Across creation we see difference. Diversity was embedded in all that the Lord God made, and that diversity was pronounced very good. And so it is with human beings.

When it comes to gender and sexuality, these differences are often subtle and may take time to develop and be recognised. In recent years the term 'transgender' has become more widely used to describe a situation where a person is born and assigned one physical sex at birth, but later identifies their inner self as of the opposite gender. The condition of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity as male or female to be opposite to one's biological or assigned sex is known, and fully recognised medically, as gender dysphoria. (Note 3 page 31)

Sometimes this is recognised and accepted by the individual themselves, and by their family and acquaintances from an early age, whilst for others the experience is of an ongoing and growing inner conflict until later in life, when they may finally come to acknowledge the issue. Some are prepared to live on in this ambiguity, but others feel driven to take steps to reconcile the issue, ranging from dressing in clothes usually associated with the other sex, through to hormone therapy and potentially also surgery, leading ultimately to physical and legally recognised gender reassignment.

Increasingly, as we learn that such feelings are inbuilt into our genetic make-up, we need to acknowledge how real these issues are for the individuals concerned. The anxieties and actions that may flow from such situations can present great difficulty and stress for the individual themselves, and for their families, and so are worthy of enormous care, sensitivity and understanding from us all.

Difference in Sexual attraction

It is important to understand that sexual attraction is quite separate from gender identity and is another element of our complex human natures. Whilst the majority of the population, are attracted to the opposite sex (heterosexual), some are attracted to the same sex as themselves (lesbian or homosexual),

Sexual attraction is quite separate from gender identity and is another element of our complex human natures

some are attracted to both sexes (bisexual), and some feel no sexual attraction to either sex (asexual).

Again, we can acknowledge that individuals will be in different places on this spectrum of sexuality. Each of us is what we are and fighting against this inborn identity is likely to produce stress, suffering and anxiety, rather than peace of mind and harmony.

Some who find themselves attracted to the same sex (homosexual, lesbian) are reconciled to the situation, and can live their lives openly and sincerely. In many countries they now have the legal right to marry, just as heterosexual couples do. Equality laws now exist in the UK and elsewhere to ensure that individuals are not discriminated against on the grounds of their sexuality. Notwithstanding this social and legal equality in wider society, many people, particularly those brought up within strict religious communities, find themselves severely conflicted between who they know themselves to be and what they have been told is right and acceptable, both to God and within their own religious community.

This inner conflict can lead to severe anxiety and mental suffering, knowing that if they 'come out' and admit their true sexuality to others then there are likely to be recriminations from their family, friends and others within the church community to which they belong.

Traditional responses to difference

In the past, prejudice and lack of understanding often led to those who were different being labelled as weak, faithless, sick, deviant or mentally ill. Some continue to assume that homosexuality is a deliberate lifestyle choice, made by individuals who consciously set out to defy society and religious norms. This mindset has led to both mental and physical persecution, discrimination and even violence, particularly towards homosexuals.

In consequence, individuals facing these issues have often kept their sexual orientation hidden, further increasing their fear of rejection, anxiety and mental suffering. In other cases, to escape this, individuals have submitted themselves to severe medical interventions, extreme forms of counselling, or even heterosexual marriage.

Matters of Personal Sexuality

Where marriage follows without honesty around the issue of an individual's sexuality, then there is the clear risk of hurt and distress arising both to their partner and themselves in the longer term, including for their families and any children which may result.

Asexuality (not being sexually attracted to either sex) usually passes under the radar of community judgment. The absence of need for any form of sexual intimacy is an aspect of sexuality which the majority may find difficult to understand and pass judgment on, but this may have unhappy consequences for those concerned and for their families if it is not acknowledged. For those who are homosexual, bisexual or transgender this anonymity is seldom possible.

The key point in all of this is that being different is not in itself a sin, it is merely the way we are as individuals.

For each of us, our nature (our genetic make-up) and nurture (the culture and environment we are raised in) both have strong influences on our behaviour and development as individuals. Life experiences are influential in forming our own view of ourselves and our view of the world around us.

The key point in all of this is that being different is not 'sin' in itself - it is merely the way we are as individuals

The challenge for the Bible believer is how to react to those who find themselves impacted or conflicted by these issues, not through their choice or in defiance of God, but as a matter of birth.

So, what is to be our response to those impacted by these matters? We can choose to react with distaste and indignation, or with understanding and empathy. Often shunned by others in society, even by their own families and other Christian brothers and sisters, the loneliness and isolation experienced by many in this position can make them vulnerable to persecution and exploitation by others. Ultimately, we each need to ask that age old question... what would Christ do?

Each one of us is a unique individual with personal hopes and fears, desires and needs, one of the most basic and important of which is to be loved and appreciated by others. For those who are followers of Christ, this will include a great need to belong within and contribute to a church community.

So, in this context, we need to ask what is sin, and what form of sexual thought and behaviour is sin?

8. What form of thought and behaviour is sin?

The Apostle James writes:

Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

James 1 v 12-15

Temptation itself is not sin. But each of us is responsible for our own thoughts, be they isolated or habitual, and for our consequent behaviour.

The Lord Jesus Christ sees into our hearts. He understands the inner person, with our hopes and intentions, fears and anxieties, trials and temptations:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4 v 15

Whatever our sexual orientation, any one of us may be physically attracted to another person. At what point does this attraction 'cross the line' and become sinful? Jesus set the highest possible standard, when he said

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'

Matthew 5 v 27-28

So what is the difference between 'just seeing' and 'wilfully looking'? Can any of us honestly claim to be sinless, when set against this standard?

Intimacy with another person is a deep need and desire of almost all of us, other than those whose personality is such that they feel no requirement

Intimacy with another person is a deep need and desire of almost all of us

for it. Do we consider that those for whom a heterosexual relationship and marriage is not possible are forever barred from intimacy? What of those who find themselves unwillingly single, or single again after marriage, or those living in a marriage without the emotional support of, or intimacy with, their spouse?

These are complex and difficult real-life issues. The desire for certainty in such matters can lead us to selectively focus on those scriptures which confirm our pre-existing opinions. We each fully appreciate that the Bible states ideals, principles and high moral standards to which we should all aspire. Yet in God's mercy it also provides divine insight, forbearance and forgiveness for our human condition and individual 'fragilities'. It is a major spiritual exercise for each of us to reflect on both principles AND practice, to balance our outlook and to appreciate the love of Christ to each of us as 'sinners'. Seeking support in the Bible for what we assume to be correct may contrast with a commandment to exercise Christ-like compassion and sympathy to the individual concerned. This may happen especially when we are faced with behaviours which we ourselves do not easily understand. Those who brought the adulterous woman (Note - not the man) to Jesus expected him to support their case as the penalty under the Law was clearly stated. Yet as we know Jesus chose grace over law.

In our interactions with those who are sexually different from ourselves, or whose sexuality leads to behaviours which come to our attention, can we accept that their struggles, though different, are of equal relevance and power to our own? By understanding this and showing empathy, we can choose to show them the same love, understanding and forgiveness which we hope Christ will show to us?

We are left to ask another age-old question: is it better for the disciple to be 'right', or to be 'kind and loving'? Did not our Lord's own example promote compassion over the strictest application of the Law?

These are some of the toughest of moral dilemmas of our discipleship, where our individual discernment, informed both by scripture and awareness of the love and forgiveness shown to each one of us, may result

Matters of Personal Sexuality

in a difference of views even within families or within our ecclesial community.

Ultimately the measure of our loving discipleship is in our individual attitudes and dealings with each other, for it is there, in our relationship with and treatment of others that we demonstrate our love of God:

We love, because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

1 John 4 v 19-21

If, after reading these verses, we are left with the question 'and who is my brother or sister, my neighbour?' – it is our Lord who provides the answer

'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' And he answered 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.

And he said to him, 'You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.' But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour? Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers...

Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' And Jesus said to him, 'You go, and do likewise.'

Luke 10 v 25-31 and 36-37

The 'Good' Samaritan acted towards the man who 'fell among robbers' with mercy and at personal cost, whereas the priest and the Levite probably used the letter of the law and their own fears to justify themselves in passing by on the other side, ignoring and turning their backs upon the one who was in need. It was the Samaritan, a foreigner, a person that strict religious Jews like the priest and the Levite would not even acknowledge in the street, who showed his love and respect for God in his

merciful actions toward the one whose injuries and need was evident to all. Our Lord's parable tells us to love our neighbour as our self, but in order to do so we also need to see our neighbour as ourselves, not lesser than us but the same as us, with exactly the same need for acceptance, compassion and forgiveness.

9. Other relationships and the Bible

There are many relationships and situations set out in the Bible which do not conform to the biblical principal of one man and one woman and those specifically sanctioned under the law. Some of these relationships were clearly abusive but there were others where deep affection and indeed love can be seen.

We are left to ponder many moral questions as part of our discipleship, and in our awakening knowledge of the complexity of sexual identity. Questions over the appropriateness of divorce, and sometimes a subsequent remarriage can exercise us. What then of other committed relationships? Committed same-sex relationships? Each may be contrary to the ideals, yet we live in a 'real' rather than an 'ideal' world.

Jacob's own relationship with the sisters Leah and Rachel, and their handmaidens Bilhah and Zilpah, flew in the face of Lev 18 v 18. Yet many of the children of some of these non-traditional relationships became part of the royal line and the lineage of Christ - a reminder to us of God working in the context of human frailty.

An aside on sexual promiscuity

It should be appreciated that sexual promiscuity is not what we are considering here.

As a side point, we should be clear that sexual promiscuity is not what we are considering here. The desire for multiple sexual partners without commitment is generally an outcome of lust and power, rather than of love. Exercise of power over another through such sexual behaviour is often simply a form of abuse and is clearly contrary to scriptural principles. Often it is the outward sign of an inner personality conflict, particularly an inability to develop meaningful relationships with others and akin to sociopathic behaviour, for example where an individual, acts without thought for the feelings of and the consequences to others.

Matters of Personal Sexuality

However even in cases of abusive sexual behaviour the situation may be complex to judge as, not infrequently, the abuser may themselves have been the subject of abuse in the past. These are difficult matters, where insight and wisdom are critical, where judgment appears simple and may come more easily than a spirit of Christ-like love and understanding.

Loving relationships in scripture

There are instances in scripture of sincere relationships between two of the same sex, which are described as ‘loving’ without there being any inference of sexuality, as Jesus demonstrated in his own life.

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

John 11 v 5

John writes in his own gospel of the close personal relationship Jesus had with each of his disciples but refers to himself as ‘the one whom Jesus loved’.

So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’

John 20 v 2

Amongst any group of friends there will always be those with whom we have a special affinity. Jesus appears to have had an inner circle of disciples: Peter, James and John, who alone witnessed the transfiguration and other miracles. Each of these were later commissioned to take leading roles in the early church. The suggestion has been made that their closeness to Jesus was part of his preparation of them to undertake this work based upon their own specific needs, as we also see in relation to Mary, Martha, Lazarus and with Mary Magdalene. The love of Jesus reached out to all as the living embodiment of the God of caring, compassionate and nurturing love.

There are times when we forget that the commandment to love each other is not just found in the New Testament but is first introduced in the Law of Moses:

Matters of Personal Sexuality

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:18

Instead of seeking revenge or bearing grudges, they should put into practice the principle 'love your neighbour as yourself'. But in order to love our neighbour as ourselves we must truly see our neighbour as ourselves.

In order to love our neighbour as ourselves we must truly see our neighbour as ourselves.

Those seeking evidence from within the Bible for same sex attraction have also cited the example of the relationship between David and Jonathan. We can see that the command from Leviticus is at the very centre of the relationship between David and Jonathan. In human terms, Jonathan had every reason to bear a grudge against David. Saul's comment was:

For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Therefore send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die

1 Samuel 20:31

In Saul's eyes this made a grudge entirely reasonable. Yet Jonathan made a covenant with David, and even gives David the symbols of kingship, significantly saying that he loved David as himself

And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.

1 Samuel 18:1

David confirms that Jonathan had brought them into a covenant relationship before the Lord:

Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you. But if there is guilt in me, kill me yourself, for why should you bring me to your father?

1 Samuel 20:8

Matters of Personal Sexuality

It is in this covenant relationship, in which God and his purpose are central, that Jonathan asks David to show 'unfailing kindness' to him and his family. Jonathan recognises that God will cut off all of David's enemies.

If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the Lord, that I may not die; and do not cut off your steadfast love from my house for ever, when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth

1 Samuel 20:14-15

Little wonder therefore that, when news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan are brought to David, he laments in moving poetry over them both. David has always seen Saul as God's anointed king. In Jonathan, he sees the commands of God in Leviticus beautifully fulfilled. There was no grudge, no revenge, only love. As David says, such a quality of love is not to be compared to the love of a man for a woman.

I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan: very pleasant have you been to me. Your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women

2 Samuel 1 v 26

Such love speaks of the love God commands and which Jesus showed in his life and death. We too should love one another as Jesus has loved us.

So, the suggestion of this relationship being something beyond friendship is not accepted and the great majority of Bible commentators recognise the relationship of David and Jonathan as that of a deep and brotherly bond.

Judgement of others

As James 1 v 14-15 makes clear, it is only when individuals allow their desires to take hold of their thoughts, and the emotions stirred up by those thoughts develop into habitual thoughts that drive subsequent actions, that sin arises. Such sin may be heterosexual or homosexual, may be enacted, or may just be in the mind, as Jesus challenged in Matthew 5. All are regarded as equally sinful.

Matters of Personal Sexuality

It can be easy to react to what we might hold to be an inappropriate relationship; however, this may not be a sexual relationship even if a couple (heterosexual or same sex) appear to be living together.

Attitudes to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (including what was formerly known as transsexual) and questioning people (LGBTQ) can arouse strong emotions, and potentially prejudice in others (see Appendix 3). The campaigning actions of some in these groups as they strive for understanding, acceptance and equality may seem to some to be extreme, even unacceptable or abhorrent. However, the underlying issues which they seek to raise deserve our thoughtful attention as a Christian duty, in recognition of the thousands who struggle daily with their sexuality and often suffer considerably and in silence.

When viewed in a scriptural context, are these matters of sexuality in a different category from any other sin? As we have seen, same sex attraction is almost always a part of a person's nature and not a deliberate choice they have made.

When viewed in a scriptural context, are these matters of sexuality in a different category from any other sin?

So, a reminder from Matthew 7.

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Matthew 7 v 1-5

And the words of Jesus are also relevant in this context. When they kept on questioning him, goading him to condemn the woman who had committed adultery and had broken the Mosaic Law, Jesus straightened up and said to them

If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.

John 8 v 7

Whilst we may be called to consider another's behaviour, we are also called upon to show mercy and forgiveness both to others and to ourselves.

Can we seek first to understand the individual, offering support and help to someone who may identify as LGBTQ, or may be confused about their sexuality or struggling with sexual temptations no different from our own?

To show understanding and compassion to an individual or individuals, in matters of gender, sexual orientation or sexual intimacy, is not to condone their actions but does demonstrate the principles laid out in 1 John 4.

10. If you are unsure about your gender or sexuality

What can we say to a follower of Christ who is struggling with his or her own gender identity, or has feelings towards others of the same sex?

Adolescence is a well-recognised time of significant hormonal change and often of sexual confusion. At this stage in life particularly some will experience feelings of anxiety about their gender or sexual orientation and may wonder whether it is permanent. Some will experience an attraction, or a 'crush' as it was often termed, for someone of the same sex. These feelings are not uncommon and are to be seen as a normal phase of growing up.

While this stage of life may cause us to feel uncertain or anxious, we should not jump to the conclusion that these feelings mean that we are gay, or that they will persist indefinitely.

In today's world there is often pressure to label sexuality early, often before being sufficiently mature to do so. This pressure may come from sex education in school, peer group pressure, internet chat rooms, potentially abusive relationships, the media, and celebrities who are strong cultural icons. These pressures are unhelpful and inappropriate, when what is really needed is time to resolve things at our own pace.

As we have explored earlier, gender identification and human sexuality are not simple, binary matters. Making assumptions about our gender identity or sexual orientation, and whether we are straight or gay, can be seriously misleading, because it over-simplifies a truly complex picture. In fact, by later life only a small percentage of people identify as gay. The reality is

that we are each on a spectrum of gender and sexuality and a much larger proportion of people possess a wide range of emotions and sexual feelings, particularly but not uniquely when in their teens.

If you feel unsure of your gender identity or sexual orientation, then you should give yourself permission to step back and consider who you really are

If you feel unsure of your gender identity or sexual orientation, then give yourself permission to step back and consider who you really are and take the time and space you need to develop and come to terms with your maturing self. Usually time, reflection and developing maturity brings the clarity and confidence you need in your true orientation and attraction.

So, there is a clear message to the follower of Christ who is struggling with these identity issues. As in *all* matters where we feel lost or confused, we can submit the matter to careful and prayerful thought and spiritual reflection. If you can, seek the help of others who you feel will have the emotional maturity to listen to you without judgment, as you explore your thoughts and feelings on the issue. Do not lose heart or think that you are alone in this struggle. Many, many others have trodden similar paths and have ultimately achieved clarity and peace and have come to know what course of action is best for them, both as individuals and as disciples of Christ.

In most cases, this process will result in certainty: a clear and unambiguous way forward. However, it is possible that your feelings of confusion or even guilt will persist, leaving you in an uncomfortable position with alternative desires.

Within all communities there are inevitably pressures to conform to what is expected, and usually to marry and ultimately to have children. Under these pressures to conform, some with homosexual, bisexual or asexual inclinations have married a person of the opposite sex and have both gone on to enjoy a happy and rewarding married life. It is equally true that other relationships formed in this way have subsequently foundered, usually with the consequence of considerable suffering and heartache for all concerned.

Honesty is always the foundation of all loving relationships and entering into a relationship based upon a lie or a half-truth can never provide the firm basis for a lasting and fulfilling partnership.

11. If you are clear about your gender or sexuality

For those who come to know with a sense of certainty that they are LGBT then it can be very damaging psychologically and spiritually to try to change or suppress these natural feelings. Being LGBT is not a disorder and does not need to be hidden, changed or treated: it is simply a part of who we are. If we can confidently and genuinely accept ourselves, then ultimately, we will be much more resilient to the stresses and strains that others may create for us and to the life challenges that we will inevitably face.

Often the greatest challenge may be from our own conscience, based upon what we have been brought up to believe to be right or wrong

Often the greatest challenge may be from our own conscience, based upon what we have been brought up to believe to be right or wrong.

Many of us grow up with a strictly defined view of what is normal, set within our own, or our parents, friends and acquaintances backgrounds, experience, cultural heritage and exposure to the attitudes or the lives of others. These rules

usually form the moral framework within which we tend to view ourselves, the world around us and those with whom we come into contact. But we cannot deny who we are. If we try to force ourselves into a life which conforms with these learned views, then we may well be setting ourselves up for a lifetime of unhappiness and fear.

Here are some further difficult questions to ponder:

- Will living in fear and anxiety make me a better disciple?
- Will I be able to serve God well by living a lie?
- Can I accept who I am, the person that the Father knows us to be, in our heart of hearts?

These are individual decisions, difficult decisions, but decisions which we must make for ourselves. In these circumstances the support and understanding of true friends, mirroring the Father's love, will be invaluable.

Matters of Personal Sexuality

When faced with these dilemmas, some have chosen to be one of those who, as Jesus put it:

have made themselves as eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 19 v 12

(again, these words are not intended literally – we are clear that they mean “have resolved to live without sexual intimacy, for the Kingdom’s sake”).

Make no mistake, it is not an easy decision to resolve to live without intimacy and the love and support of another. Jesus knew that difficulty clearly, when he said:

All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given

Matthew 19 v 11.

Not all disciples in this position will be able to accept sexual abstinence as a way of life. Yet being single may provide focus, benefits and freedoms not found in marriage, as the apostle Paul makes clear:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided.

And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.

1 Corinthians 7 v 32-34

Paul says in the same chapter (note as a concession, not a command) that he wishes *all* believers to be unmarried as he appeared to be, so that they can devote themselves to the Lord:

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Matters of Personal Sexuality

1 Corinthians 7 v 6-9

However even Paul concedes that for the majority of disciples

it is better to marry than to burn with passion

1 Corinth 7 v 9

Paul recognises that the need for intimacy and sexual intimacy with another is strong, so does not seek to enforce a celibate single life upon those who cannot maintain it.

For those who know that they are LGBT, and in good conscience need to be themselves and perhaps have the love and support of a partner, fellowship in our community may be very challenging if not impossible; unless they can find the understanding and support of brothers and sisters who are in conscience able to provide compassion, support and fellowship to them. It will need members within that community who can approach this issue with thoughtful, prayerful love and kindness, exercising spiritual discernment in action and behaviour towards those concerned.

Where this is not available, it is recognised that the situation could be unbearable.

The view expressed by others who have found themselves fully convinced of their homosexual feelings has often been that, as with prohibitions on divorce and remarriage

With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible

Matt 19 v 10 and v 26.

We should all remember that God's forgiveness has no limit, that no action puts us beyond the love and mercy of God. Jesus was asked '*and how many times should I forgive my brother?*'. His answer has been a comfort to faithful men and women down the ages, but a test for those who by the grace of God find themselves untroubled by such temptations and circumstances in their own lives.

12. A challenge to all of us

Around the world there are a significant number of brothers and sisters who identify themselves as LGBTQ. Whether you are personally acquainted with any of them or not, their existence provides the community with a

test of our discipleship and the extent to which we are able to exercise to others the love, mercy and forgiveness which we hope the Lord will show to each one of us.

As examples, there may be situations from a woman's earlier abusive relationship where she can now feel safe only in a loving relationship with someone of her own sex. A situation like this needs sensitivity and understanding. Similarly, a homosexual man may need the love and support of another man, as might a trans woman who identifies as other than her assigned birth gender.

Equally, couples with difficult marriages need our love and support, and so do those who live alone in life, whether through circumstance or choice.

Equally, couples with difficult marriages need our love and support, and so do those who live alone in life, whether through circumstance or choice. It is worth remembering that even 'in the Lord' not all heterosexual marriages are happy and nurturing. Many have a special challenge to contend with in life which may lead them along a path which others, not personally impacted by such issues, would not choose or endorse.

It is all too easy for those who enjoy a loving, monogamous, heterosexual relationship and a family and generally happy circumstances in life to feel outraged or unsympathetic to others in different situations. It is all too easy for those who are unemotional or for whom sexual desire has no hold to belittle the struggles and apparent sexual failings of others. But these difficulties face many more of us than may at first be apparent.

What we react to in others can sometimes reflect our own conflicts. So, do we sometimes allow our own fears and anxieties to be reflected in the way we behave and react to others?

Jesus chose his disciples from a diverse range of backgrounds to support him in his ministry. Men and women, rich and poor, married and single. All were different, each faced their own personal difficulties, and all contributed in their different ways to the community, to the body of Christ.

What is clear from scripture is that God seeks relationship with us. Not by means of our own perfection, but instead, based upon the intentions which are in our hearts and minds, by recognising our own imperfection and by

being humble enough to place our trust in God's enduring love and mercy. Paul speaks clearly to us of this dilemma in Romans 7:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Romans 7 v 24

13. Some further difficult and challenging questions

We know that through this process we have each expanded our knowledge of the subject matter. We have also deepened our understanding of the complexities of the issues arising and the problems of reconciling a literal understanding of certain scriptures with the full extent of the love of God and the mercy and forgiveness offered to each of us.

This love, mercy and forgiveness is offered to us despite our failings, be they isolated or repeated, so that in our weakness we may each fully appreciate the grace we have in our Lord, the Son of Man, the only one who has actually lived the divine ideal.

The difficult discussions which we have had in writing this booklet have made each of us more aware of our individual need for God's love and mercy.

The difficult discussions which we have had in writing this booklet have made each of us more aware of our individual need for God's love and mercy. We have each benefitted and grown through the challenging issues we have debated.

This booklet is not the place to recount these discussions, but we offer below, in love, some of the further questions that we have encountered

so that individual brothers, sisters and ecclesias might also benefit from similar discussion and debate.

- What is to be our reaction when we see 'sinners' in our midst, those who continually 'miss the mark', those who we may personally feel are 'unworthy' of the Lord's name?

Matters of Personal Sexuality

- Is it easier to treat those individuals as did the religious people in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, and pass by on the other side?
- Are we provoked to feelings of judgment and condemnation...or of compassion, sympathy, understanding, even love and mutual support?
- In the 'failings' of others do we also see our own need for forgiveness and mercy?
- Are we in conscience able to understand and empathise with them in their position, to treat them as our friend and neighbour, as ourselves?
- In full awareness of our own need for compassion and forgiveness, can we be moved to meet the needs of others for inclusion, caring support, equality and acceptance, even as our brothers and sisters in our shared walk to the Kingdom? Examples of these needs might be:
 - a brother or sister who is unsure of their sexuality and seeking guidance and support
 - a brother or sister who is sexually different and has made a conscious decision to live a celibate life
 - a couple of the same sex who are living together in a non-sexual relationship

Should the potential for ecclesial fellowship be denied to those in such circumstances?

These are issues which are matters of conscience – both as individuals and collectively with our fellow brothers and sisters, where our thoughts will be guided by scripture and where the words of our Lord when presented with a 'sinner' will be in our minds:

Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone
John 8 v 7

14. Concluding thoughts

The Bible shows us real lives where individual imperfections are acknowledged and forgiven, as is notably revealed in the lives of the patriarchs. Even within the context of sexual relationships, God makes allowances for our human frailty as we see in the life of David '*the friend of God*' and the one who was '*a man after God's own heart*'

As we commented at the beginning, the subject matter and preparation of this booklet has been the most challenging the CSN has faced to date. It

Matters of Personal Sexuality

has involved very many hours of prayer, discussion with individuals from diverse backgrounds and much debate within the editorial sub-committee.

We each face challenges in our individual lives - physical and mental challenges, emotional and spiritual challenges. Because we are unique, these challenges are different for each one of us.

Some of these challenges are obvious to others, some can be openly discussed, some are known only to our Heavenly Father and his Son. In the midst of these challenges we can often feel separated and alone; however, our Lord Jesus Christ is aware of our struggles and God's love and mercy are always available to us.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is aware of our struggles and God's love and mercy are always available to us.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long"; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8 v31-38

Such is the God of love we believe in and such are the qualities of love, compassion and forgiveness revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Notes

Note 1

This is set out in the current edition of the following government documentation: 'What to do if you are worried a child is being abused', (DFE-00124-2015); and 'Working together to Safeguard Children' (DFE-00131-2015 'A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children')

Note 2

Use of LGBTQ in this booklet

The words and definitions used to describe specific genders or sexualities are constantly under review as knowledge and understanding of these issues improves and the sensitivities of those concerned are more fully taken into account.

The acronym LGBTQ, defined as: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning or queer, as at the time of publication, is frequently used and understood by the general public. The authors are aware that some will find this definition inadequate for their specific purpose.

Whilst not wishing to cause any offence to any specific group, this general collective definition together with other words covering gender or sexuality are used in this document as they are regarded as those most familiar to the expected audience for this publication.

Note 3

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/gender-dysphoria/>

This NHS website provides comprehensive information and guidelines about gender dysphoria and other sexual conditions, together with advice about getting medical and legal help, and the legal requirements protecting trans-sexual people in the workplace and wider society against victimisation, harassment and discrimination. This has considerable implications for our community and our attitude to and treatment of diversity.

Note 4

Our Lord says that one sin will not be forgiven.

Matters of Personal Sexuality

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven

Luke 12 v 10

The meaning of ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ and what would constitute such blasphemy is unclear. There are various interpretations of this verse, one of which is that God’s forgiveness could be denied to us if we continually fail to follow God’s commandments. However, none can claim to wholly follow in every aspect of their lives and the application of this verse to specific sexual matters would similarly appear unwarranted.

Appendix 1: Parenting responsibilities and challenges.

In recent years society has become more aware that issues of gender and sexuality are complex. These issues are now impacting upon many of us: in the workplace, schools, colleges and universities and within families and the church. Perhaps the most challenging to many from within faith-based communities are the issues of gender reassignment and acceptance of those in same sex relationships. Society now teaches and expects that such individuals and couples are treated with equality, sensitivity and understanding and schools in particular are now teaching children to accept such individuals and families, as they are and without judgement.

The aim of this teaching in schools is to accept difference and so minimise prejudice

How do we respond to this rising challenge as parents?

Schools are now required by law to incorporate and define difference in families to ensure equality of treatment in sexuality and same-sex families and this teaching is causing debate and some protest within many religious groups worried that it is in conflict with Bible teaching and concerned about the impact of this teaching upon the attitudes of their own young people.

It is important that our young children are aware of different family structures so that they can understand why their friend has no mother or father or perhaps two mothers or two fathers and not the conventional mother and father. In many schools it is the norm for children to have only one parent and often more than one stepfather in their lives. This is increasingly common in the church too.

The aim of this teaching in schools is to accept difference and so minimise prejudice. As parents, who may be concerned by some of this teaching, do we have a responsibility to contact school heads and teachers to clarify what is being taught and then, if necessary, to express our concerns rather than relying upon hearsay or what others tell us?

We are all exposed to a modern-day culture within the media, social networking, films and computer games redefining what it means to be

Matters of Personal Sexuality

successful, admired and accepted by society, often in ways which are in conflict with the clear example set by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Such stereotypes of the rich, popular and successful, are often shallow and limited but can appear as attractive options to our children in their formative years.

Each is to be encouraged to be what they are, the best that they can be, to the glory of God. Whatever our gender or sexuality, we are here to reflect the character of Christ, to show the 'fruits of the spirit' to those around us.

Gender and sexuality are irrelevant in the context of the 'fruits of the Spirit' which Christ promotes as part of a Godly, selfless life.

In contrast, society often promotes a selfish life which focuses upon the 'works of the flesh'. Equality, fairness and kindness are not something we are afraid of but where teaching is contrary to 'the fruits of the spirit' then we need to be wary and the thought, 'what would Jesus do' will be continually at the forefront of our minds.

Appendix 2: A consideration of the sin of Sodom

The story of the destruction of Sodom is often simplistically portrayed as God's judgment upon homosexuals. However, when we look at the record more closely, a more nuanced picture emerges. Rape has been used throughout history, particularly in war and times of civil disorder, as a means of humiliating and subduing others.

Today rape is regarded as a crime of violence, rather than a sex act. All rape carries stigma, but male rape, especially in conservative societies, is regarded as a particularly powerful form of humiliation. Was it humiliation that the men of Sodom were seeking to inflict by means of the attempted rape of the two strangers entertained by Lot, rather than mere sexual gratification?

In a society where hospitality to strangers was regarded as obligatory, Sodom's actions were notorious.

The incident is commented upon in the book of Ezekiel :

As I live, declares the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done.

⁴⁹ Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her

Matters of Personal Sexuality

daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. ⁵⁰ They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it. ⁵¹ Samaria has not committed half your sins. You have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed

Ezekiel 16 v 48-51

Arrogance, gluttony, self-obsession and failure to help the poor and needy - each of these things are commented upon before the mention of, 'abomination'. If the latter was appalling, the prophet goes on to say that Israel has also committed 'abominations' and behaved even more detestably than the citizens of Sodom, making them seem 'righteous' in comparison.

In Matthew 11 v 23-24 Jesus uses language like that of Ezekiel to warn the people of his time that their behaviour made them worse than the inhabitants of Sodom who were destroyed by fire.

And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.

In this context, can we really say that homosexuality is condemned above other aspects of human behaviour?

Appendix 3: What is LGBTQ?

Legislation in the UK

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning people now receive greater recognition, equality and protection in law than at any other time in UK history.

The Equality Act 2010 replaced earlier anti-discrimination laws with a single Act. It simplified the law, removed inconsistencies and made it easier for people to understand and comply with it. It also strengthened UK law in important ways to help tackle discrimination and inequality and has the

Matters of Personal Sexuality

potential to secure greater fairness and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people across Britain.

Church communities in certain circumstances can specify that they will provide goods, facilities or services only to people of a religion or belief without infringing the law, though what this means in practice is subject to occasional challenge in the courts, as was seen in the 2018 Ashers Bakery 'gay cake' case

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-43955734>

Definitions.

Age UK is a charity which provides support to older people and their relatives and as such is a neutral source of information on the topic of sexuality. The following definitions are taken from the Age UK booklet 'Safe to be me' - A resource pack for professionals (with permission).

See their web site www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/programmes/safe-to-be-me/

Who is lesbian?

The word most often used as a term of self-description by women is lesbian, though some women prefer gay. It is derived from Lesbos, the name of the Greek island on which the lyric poet Sappho lived, whose love poems to other women have made her an enduring lesbian icon.

Who is gay?

The word gay is used by, and to describe, both men and women but is more commonly associated with men. It has been used since the 1960s as a way of distancing oneself from the suggestions of abnormality and illness associated with the rather clinical term 'homosexual', which is still usually avoided by people. There is some debate as to its origins (including being an acronym of Good As You!).

Who is bisexual?

Bisexual, or bi, people are attracted to both women and men. Being bisexual is about identity rather than behaviour, so it isn't necessary for someone to have acted on their attraction to another person.

It is not unusual for older people who are gay or lesbian to have been married to someone of the opposite gender in their earlier life and then

come out as gay or lesbian. However, some may still describe themselves as bisexual in recognition of the fact that their marriage or earlier relationship was still significant.

Some bisexual people can feel that they don't entirely belong in either heterosexual or gay 'worlds', which can lead to self-censorship in different social groups.

Who is trans?

Transgender and trans are inclusive terms to describe a range of gender identities, including people who intermittently cross-dress, non-binary (gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine and are thus outside the 'binary' of male and female) and transsexual people (those who identify as a different gender to the one they were assigned at birth). It is the term most used by the trans community.

Trans man describes someone assigned female sex at birth but who identifies as a man. Likewise, trans woman describes someone assigned male sex at birth but who identifies as a woman. It's worth noting, however, that unless a person's trans history is relevant to the discussion, she or he is very likely to wish to be referred to simply as a woman or a man.

Other terms

You may hear the word 'queer' being used by some LGBT people, and some lesbian women prefer the term 'dyke'. Though reclaiming these previously derogatory words is important for some people, they won't feel comfortable to everyone and may cause offence, especially to those who remember their 'abusive use'.

