

## **Pannenberg on love and sexuality**

*Wolfhart Pannenberg is Professor Emeritus  
at the Institute of Fundamental Theology, University of Munich*

**CAN LOVE ever be sinful?** The entire tradition of Christian doctrine teaches that there is indeed such a thing as inverted, perverted love.

Human beings are created for love, as creatures of the God who is Love. And yet that divine appointment is corrupted wherever people turn away from God, wherever they love other things more than God. Jesus says, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10.37). Thus, even in the case of love for one's parents, love for God must take precedence, despite the fact that love for parents is the explicit subject of the fourth commandment.

### **The foundation of all sexuality**

What this means for the area of sexual behaviour can be seen in Jesus's teaching about divorce. In order to answer the Pharisees' question about the admissibility of divorce, Jesus refers back to the creation of human beings. It is here that he sees God expressing his purpose for these his creatures: creation confirms that God has created human beings as male and female. This, too, is found to be the reason why a man leaves his father and mother to be united with his wife, so the two will be one flesh.

Jesus concludes from this that the unbreakable permanence of fellowship between husband and wife is the goal of the Creator's will for human beings. The indissoluble fellowship of marriage, therefore, is the goal of our creation as sexual beings (Mark 10.2-9).

### **The Bible is not time-bound**

This word of Jesus constitutes the foundation and the criterion for all Christian pronouncements on questions of sexuality. The point here is not just marriage in particular, but quite comprehensively the creational identification of our existence as sexual beings. According to Jesus' teaching, human sexuality as male and as female is intended for the indissoluble fellowship of marriage. This standard informs Christian teaching about the entire domain of sexual behaviour.

Jesus' perspective by and large corresponds to Jewish tradition, even though his stress on the indissolubility of marriage goes beyond the provision for divorce within Jewish law (Deuteronomy 24.1). It was a Jewish conviction that men and women in their sexual identity were intended for the community of marriage. This accounts for the Old Testament's assessment of sexual behaviour which departs from this norm: fornication and adultery as well as homosexual relations.

The Bible's assessments of homosexual practice are unambiguous in their pointed rejection, and all its statements on this subject agree without exception. The holiness code of Leviticus incontrovertibly affirms, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Leviticus 18.22). Chapter 20 of the same book includes such behaviour among the crimes meriting capital punishment (Leviticus 20.12; it is significant that the same applies to adultery in verse 10). On these matters, Judaism always knew itself to be distinct from other nations.

This same distinctiveness continued to determine the New Testament's statements about

homosexuality, in contrast to Hellenistic culture which took no offence at homosexual relations. In Romans, Paul includes homosexual behaviour among the consequences of turning away from God (Romans 1.27). In 1 Corinthians, homosexual practice belongs with fornication, adultery, idolatry, greed, drunkenness, theft and robbery, as the kinds of behaviour which preclude participation in the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6.9f); Paul affirms that through baptism Christians have become free from their entanglement in all such practices (6.11). (cpw: and 1 Tim 1.8-11)

The New Testament contains not a single passage that might indicate a more positive assessment of homosexual activity to counterbalance these Pauline statements. Thus, the entire biblical witness puts practised homosexuality, without exception, among the kinds of behaviour which give particularly striking expression to humanity's turning away from God.

This exegetical result places very narrow boundaries around the view of homosexuality in any Church that is under the authority of scripture. What is more, the Bible's statements on this subject merely constitute the negative corollary to its positive views on the creational purpose of men and women in their sexuality: we are not dealing with marginal opinions that can be neglected without detriment to the Christian message as a whole.

Moreover, the biblical statements about homosexuality cannot be relativised as the expressions of a cultural situation that today is simply outdated. We are dealing here with a subject in which the biblical witnesses from the outset deliberately opposed the assumptions of their cultural environment in the name of faith in the God of Israel, who in creation appointed men and women for a particular identity.

Modern advocates for a change in the Church's view of homosexuality point out that the biblical authors were unaware of new anthropological evidence which, it is said, suggests that homosexuality must be regarded as a "given" constituent of the psychosomatic identity of homosexual people, existing before any sexual expression. For the sake of clarity, it is better to speak here of a homophile inclination as distinct from homosexual practice. Such phenomena occur not only in people who are homosexually active.

### **Inclination need not dictate practice**

It is characteristic of human beings that our sexual impulses permeate our behaviour in every area of life. This includes relationships with persons of the same sex. However, precisely because erotic motives are involved in all aspects of human behaviour, we are faced with the task of integrating them into the whole of our life and conduct. The existence of homophile inclinations does not lead automatically to homosexual practice.

The reality of homophile inclinations, therefore, need not be denied and must not be condemned. The question, however, is how to handle such inclinations. Here we must deal with the conclusion that homosexual activity constitutes a departure from the norm for sexual behaviour which has been given to men and women as creatures of God.

In the view of the Church, this is the case not only for homosexuality but for any sexual activity that does not intend the goal of marriage between man and wife, and hence in particular for adultery. The Church has to live with the fact that, in this area of life as in others, departures from the norm are not exceptional but common.

The Church must encounter all those concerned with tolerance and understanding, but must also call them to repentance. It cannot surrender the distinction between the norm and

behaviour which departs from it.

Here lies the boundary of a Christian Church that knows itself to be bound by the authority of scripture. Those who urge the Church to change the norm of its teaching on this matter must know that they are promoting schism. If a Church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognised homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a Church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of scripture.

A Church which took such a step would thereby have ceased to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

*Translated by Dr Markus Bockmuehl for the Church Times June 1996. Wolfhart Pannenberg is Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Fundamental Theology, University of Munich.*