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About The Historical Context And Limitations Of A Seemingly Unquestionable Validity

Would Paul also have used phrases such as 'not inherit the kingdom of God' (1Cor 6,9f) or 'contrary to the sound doctrine' (1Tim 1,10) if he had known about a homosexual predisposition? Maybe not. Would he have tolerated a homosexual couple seeking a lifelong partnership in his congregation if he had had to deal with this question? Considering the historical background of Greek morals, presumably not. But being a son of his times, he wouldn't have tolerated in his congregation women teaching, men with long hair, or women without any headgear either. Do we also want to submit to these ideas as a logical consequence?

Paul's teachings are of undeniable importance to the spread of Christianity and to the theological foundation of Christian doctrines. I don't see any necessity to play off his teachings against Jesus' statements as being inferior or less inspired. Nevertheless, Paul was also subject to misjudgements of individual life circumstances as Acts report freely and without idealizing Paul: Barnabas, the pastoral counselor, didn't share Paul's opinion that the later Evangelist Mark would be unsuitable to serve in God's kingdom after his failure on the first mission journey. Barnabas rather helped him to become a valuable coworker. Paul, at first, clung to his evaluation so unbendingly that the missionary team Barnabas-Paul broke up and parted in disagreement over this issue, even though Paul revised his opinion later. Hence, whatever the historical person Paul could have or couldn't have tolerated at his time can only serve as limited criteria to discuss present-day questions.

Even though the Bible is the Word of God – which I consider undoubtedly true – its statements and ideas are still attached to a certain time and culture as it only discussed those questions that were known and relevant at the time the Bible was written. For example, it gives instructions on the behaviour between slaves and their owners, which is an issue that doesn't concern us anymore in our cultural realm – thank goodness. And yet, it doesn't tell us how a Christian should think about the internet or about organ donation, which political party one should vote for and so on. All of these things didn't exist in biblical times. So, it is justified to ask: Does the Bible comment on a homosexual *disposition* or on a homosexual true *relationship* at all, if the discussed homosexual practices were actually exercised by heterosexuals and were mostly of promiscuous nature, and if the psychological notion of personality, that has created the concept of homosexuality in the first place, didn't correspond to general thinking at that time?

It is generally indispensable to take into account the specific historical context in order to understand the meaning of a word or an expression in question. Jesus, for instance, said: '[...] treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector' (Mt 8,17). But he said these words in a particular historical context in which the discredited profession of collecting taxes was considered the embodiment of godless life and betrayal of God's People Israel. No biblical exegete would uncritically maintain this interpretation for a modern customs officer. In this case, we consider it obvious that we have to explore the historical context in order to understand what the contemporaries of Jesus had in mind when they heard the word 'tax collector'. Why should we think it out of the question to do the very same thing with respect to

homosexuality?

Let's take another example: Quite close to the verses in Leviticus, that describe sexual intercourse between men as abomination, we can find another passage dealing with magical practices that prescribes: 'You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.' (Lev 19,27). Read on its own, this law doesn't make any sense; it has to be read in the context of the following chapter and can, thus, be understood properly: In Lev 20,23, God bans the Israelites from following the detested customs of the Canaanites. Obviously, the Canaanites' shaving customs must have had some sort of cultic relevance that the Israelites' hairstyle shouldn't remind them of. Orthodox Jews can be admired for their consistency in still letting their sidelocks grow. The symbolic meaning that was once associated with letting your hair grow, however, has been lost in our world for a long time already. Only few centuries ago, it was even considered a sign of a lack of serious belief in American Christian, colleges if male students didn't wear short hair. Thus, the Old Testament's ban proves not to have any sense anymore.

What if homosexual intercourse (as a sexual habit of heterosexuals) was forbidden for the very same reason: because it corresponded to Canaanite customs – but has as much in common with a loving relationship of people with a homosexual disposition today as magic cults from pre-Christian times have in common with modern short hairstyles?

But conservative interpretations normally still argue that it was of no importance to discuss how homosexuality was lived in real life. The lack of such a differentiation in the Bible should be message enough to condemn any kind of homosexual way of life.

This argumentation should be followed very cautiously. Does an honest interpretation of what the Bible has to say about homosexuality really force a general condemnation? Especially as even these interpretations, discussing other issues, find it completely acceptable to reduce the validity of biblical verses with rather general statements to specific situations or even to individual cases.

Let's have a look at the narration about the rich man who asks Jesus about eternal life (Mt 19,16ff; Mk 10,17ff; Lk 18,18ff). First of all, Jesus asks him to keep the commandments. When the man assures him to have obeyed them all of his life, Jesus replies that there is one more thing missing to give him eternal life: He should sell everything he has and follow Jesus. But the man doesn't want to fulfill this last demand, and Jesus confirms once more the seriousness of the situation and says: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.' (Mt 19,24).

Even though Jesus only speaks to one single man in this situation, he raises the universal question of how to obtain eternal life and how to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus demands once more in the very same words to sell all one's belongings and to give the money to the poor – in this case he talks to all his followers (Lk 12,33). Which wholehearted Christian has never before felt struck by the impact of Jesus' demand to sell everything you have? And which of them have asked themselves whether this statement was universally valid and true for every Christian? Interestingly enough, for the apostles and the first Christians this was definitely a general claim that led them to the decision of living in communal joint property as a congregation. (The fact that this 'experiment' didn't work out in the long run and that it led the church in Jerusalem to poverty cannot be used as a criterion of whether what Jesus said was valid or invalid.) Most interpreters, though, have been limiting the relevance of this statement to an individual case – which had the nice side-effect for them to have successfully defied any risk of having to give away their own possessions ...

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It is the New Testament especially that makes very unfriendly remarks about wealth. Many comments don't even differentiate between resources that were gained through exploitation and were connected with greed and stinginess and those that weren't. Rich people in Jesus' parables are only positive when they are portrayed as an allegory to God (the king of a merciless servant in Mt 18,23f; the father of the prodigal son in Lk 15,11ff), otherwise they represent negative characters (the rich fool or the rich man in the parable of Lazarus in Lk 12,15f and 16,19f). One of the very few passages in the letters that do differentiate, but, notwithstanding, warn as well about richness can be found in 1.Tim 6,17-19.

Apart from that, judgement is expressed wholesale: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.' (Mt 19,24). 'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.' (Lk 6,24). James words also amount to a polemic against the rich that virtually presume that wealth in itself is injustice (cf. James 2,5-7; 5,1-6), and he threatens: 'Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.' and '[]Their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.' According to 1.Timothy, striving for wealth (which our economies are based on) automatically leads 'into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction' (1.Tim 6,9).

In this regard, the Bible impressively conjures up an infernal tribunal and social corruption. It is quite astonishing to see how rarely Evangelical churches, however, feel obliged to critically question where or how their members acquired all of their money. Has there ever been a case of church discipline because of wealth? If the church of Christ took action against rich people in their own ranks as vigorously as against homosexuals on the basis of these 'undifferentiated' statements in the Bible, churches in Middle Europe and North America would be practically swept clean – since they own downright scandalously much compared to the world population. Maybe it is due to this age-long unholy alliance with wealth and power that the church has gambled away its own good reputation in the eyes of modern people.

Obviously and in contrast to the judgement of homosexuals, Christians make an effort to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' rich people, between these who live Christian values such as mercy and generosity and those who use all their possessions for self-centered purposes. Of course it would occur to nobody to read the polemic passages in the Gospels and in James literally and to categorically deny the rich to be able to live a life that pleases God, which the choice of words nevertheless could imply. All reasonable Christians would rather form their opinion from the rich people's lifestyle. But Christians behave absolutely differently against homosexuals. In this question they clutch to wordings – even though these words were uttered in special historical contexts – and they absolutely refuse to differentiate between different lifestyles.

Why don't we have a look into another case of a narrow interpretation of an otherwise general biblical statement: Jesus' parable of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31f). Nowhere does the introduction indicate that this should be a special judgement only for non-Christians or for those who never heard about Jesus in their whole lives, or that it should be about other peoples' behaviour towards the people of Israel or whatever the specific interpretations might look like. Jesus rather talks about 'all people' who have to appear before him and in the end all cursed will go into eternal punishment, while the righteous will inherit God's eternal kingdom. The only criteria that decides whether someone will be punished or blessed is his loving or indifferent behaviour towards his (suffering) fellow man through whom Jesus has met both, the blessed and the cursed, during their lifetimes.

If we intended to really take this absolutely general statement literally as a possible answer to the question of who will be saved and who will not, spreading the gospel of the atonement and resurrection of Jesus' would be superfluous. Social workers, nurses or heads of soup kitchens would count among the most treasured trades, because they make a person blessed. If, as the parable depicts, social behaviour was the only thing that counts, Paul, the ambassador of the 'gospel of the cross', would have been a fool before the world and on top of that a false teacher in the eyes of God. However, none in the evangelical world interprets the parable in this way. The first listeners of this allegory already considered it a crucial decision to accept Jesus' atoning death on the cross in order to be saved. Whichever the most comprehensible arguments might be that reduce the parable's validity to a particular, even important, core, they will always be contrary to its general words.

The Bible doesn't only contain sweeping generalizations about certain concepts, but also about individual people. At the end of the books of Kings for instance, we are given the reason why God punished the whole people of Israel and leads them into Babylonian captivity after his calls to repentance proved to be futile: 'Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon.' (2Kings 24:3-4). Here, God speaks of the king Manasseh, who had lived and reigned some decades before Israel was captured. After a short episode in which Israel returned to God under the pious king Hezekiah, they were once more entrapped to idolatry by Hezekiah's son Manasseh. The prophet Jeremiah also announces the people's judgement: 'And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem.' (Jer 15:4).

Which conclusion is the reader supposed to draw than that of Manasseh being a distorted deceiver through and through, the personification of godless royalties – especially after having read the devastating descriptions of the details of his life and work in 2Kings 21?

And still, after the parallel text in the book of Chronicles, this king takes a complete turnaround towards God and honestly repents his sins: '[...] he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. [...] and God [...] heard his plea [...] He also restored the altar of the Lord [...] and he commanded Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel.' (2Chr 33:12f.16). None of the other three texts even slightly suggests this new relationship between Manasseh and God. All of them categorically condemn his deeds. It is therefore dangerous to draw seemingly certain, generalized conclusions from negative statements in the Bible that follow one particular thrust. Although God mercifully accepted the king's atonement, the name of Manasseh embodies the prototypical, impenitent behaviour of the people characterized by sins. If the sinful behaviour of pederast men in Greek culture mentioned in Romans represents the general forlornness of the world, God's verdict about homosexual people might be completely different from what Romans 1 seems to suggest.

The word of God doesn't lend itself to judge situations or people by picking out single verses. Acts mentions the Jews in the parish of Berea as role models because they examined the new teachings of Paul, that must have seemed dubious to them at first, 'searching the Scriptures daily find out whether these things were so' (Acts 17:11). 'Searching the Scriptures daily' surely doesn't mean to quickly look up individual statements and to build one's judgement on it. It rather requires to seriously study the whole environment of a question, to include differing statements, to

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question everything and scrutinize oneself and to be willing to think in new ways – which is all in all an attitude that homosexuals often sorely miss in their fellow Christians.

This list could be continued a lot further. It is wrong and unbiblical to claim that all of the Bible's statements have to be accepted literally without questioning them and that it is illegitimate to examine to whom they can be applied and to whom not. Even its advocates do not follow this approach consistently with regard to all questions. In a lot of topics people naturally and logically ask about who or what a passage in the Bible is talking about or referring to in order to assess its implications. Nevertheless, Christian churches have so many reservations towards homosexuals that every attempt to understand the Bible in a way that does justice to its historical context as well as to those personally concerned today will be blemished as a distortion of biblical values.