

Are the concerns of LGBT+ Christians and biblical authority mutually exclusive?

This essay will explore the concerns of LGBT+ people with regard to Christianity and biblical interpretation, and will investigate the concept of biblical authority and the extent to which these issues are compatible. As this author is a priest serving in the Church of England, 'Church' positions will refer to accepted doctrines, traditions and interpretations within the Church of England. The acronym LGBT+ is used to indicate individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, genderfluid, intersex, asexual, aromantic or queer; in other words, all those for whom a cis-heteronormative identity is not appropriate.¹ LGBT+ will be used throughout this essay unless there are particular reasons to identify a specific group of people, for example gay men or transgender individuals.

Certain parts of the Church have often used passages from the Bible to justify persecution, abuse and exclusion of people who identify as LGBT+, particularly since the nineteenth century; 'conservative' Christians accuse those who affirm LGBT+ individuals as failing to follow biblical teaching.² A number of so-called 'lobber passages' are used in these arguments (for example, Lev. 18:22), some of which will be discussed below.

The concerns of LGBT+ Christians

Specific concerns held by LGBT+ Christians vary, according to their individual gender and/or sexual/romantic identities and experiences, and so whilst this essay will consider some of these, it should be noted that this analysis will not be exhaustive, and that not all concerns will apply to all LGBT+ people in the same ways. As a cis-gay man in a civil partnership with his cis-male partner, the author will endeavour to cover a range of concerns, but can only write with personal authority about those which speak to his own lived experience.

Primary concerns which are likely to be shared among most, if not all, LGBT+ Christians are the need for affirmation and acceptance by the Church, both as Christians and as beloved of God. This often includes seeking inclusion in the life of the Church at all levels, many of which have been, and in some cases remain, blocked to LGBT+ persons. Protection for LGBT+ Christians from spiritual abuse, particularly from so-called 'conversion therapies', is also much needed, and has recently been highlighted as a safeguarding concern. Whether as a result of specific spiritual abuses or more generally in the exclusion of LGBT+ people, there is a definite need for a strong pastoral response in providing healing and consolation for the experiences shared by many LGBT+ Christians at the hands of the Church at an institutional level and/or in our treatment by 'conservative' Christians.

¹ For discussion of the use of appropriate acronyms and terms, see L.M. TONSTAD *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), pp.3-4.

² M. WEST and R.E. SHORE-GOSS 'Preface' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), p.xv.

In addition to these concerns, specific issues need to be addressed for certain groups with the LGBT+ Christian community. For gay men and lesbians, and others in non-heteronormative relationships, there needs to be affirmation that their lives and relationships are not sinful; further, for some there needs to be a recognition of the validity of their relationships as being of equal worth to heterosexual relationships, which for some includes seeking the Church's blessing on same-sex partnerships and marriages.³ For some transgender, intersex or non-binary and gender-fluid individuals, affirmation that physical transition from one biological sex to another, or having an identity which does not conform to binary sex or gender characteristics, is not sinful and that we are all created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26) might be of paramount importance in seeking to understand what the Bible has to say concerning their lives and, indeed, their very beings. Interpretation and affirmation of gender identities, perhaps particularly in the portrayal of hegemonic masculinities in which perfect males sit atop a hierarchy with 'less perfect versions of the male sex' below them (women being at the bottom), as described by Colleen Conway,⁴ will be important to certain individuals within the LGBT+ community. For those who identify as asexual or aromantic, or who feel compelled to practice celibacy because of their position in the Church, a perspective on celibacy and/or virginity might be of value. Linn M. Tonstad asserts that LGBT+ people can be reassured by finding 'ancestors and antecedents' in Scripture and in Christian tradition, and notes the affirmative effect this can offer, confirming our place in God's story.⁵

When it comes to reading and interpreting the Bible, Joseph A. Marchal observes that there are three primary hermeneutic approaches which are used by LGBT+ people and those who seek to affirm them: 'historical-contextual, affirmative-identifying, or queerly-critical'.⁶ The historical-critical approach will be used below to discuss 'clobber passages', as it seeks to demonstrate that through an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of biblical texts, these texts can be shown to have quite different meanings than those which are often assumed. Affirmative-identifying readings will go beyond this to show that Scripture positively affirms LGBT+ people, and, Marchal notes, these interpretations have often been conducted by LGBT+ Christian ministers, and their allies,⁷ as the present author will seek to do. The third approach, 'queerly critical' uses Queer Theology which seeks to challenge all established norms and conventions, especially in the areas of gender identity and sexuality.⁸ Whilst Queer Theology can be a helpful hermeneutic to understanding how biblical texts and Church teachings can be read differently or challenged, a student of Queer Theology might challenge the premise of some of the LGBT+ concerns mentioned. For example, gay men and lesbians seeking recognition of their loving, monogamous relationships might well be questioned on the basis of their seeking to emulate heteronormative relationships, which for a Queer Theologian, such as Patrick S. Cheng,

³ The 'Church's blessing' may need to be sought, but as should be evident to the reader, this author firmly believes that loving same-sex relationships already have God's blessing.

⁴ C. CONWAY 'The Construction of Gender in the New Testament' in in A. Thatcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.222.

⁵ L.M. TONSTAD *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), pp.24-25.

⁶ J.A. MARCHAL 'LGBTIQ Strategies of Interpretation' in B.H. Dunning (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender and Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.177.

⁷ J.A. MARCHAL 'LGBTIQ Strategies of Interpretation', pp.181-182.

⁸ P.S. CHENG *Radical Love: An Introduction to QUEER Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), p.9.

might be challenged as a socially-constructed binary;⁹ for this reason, Queer Theology alone might not be a completely appropriate hermeneutic for an affirming LGBT+ reading of Scripture.

Biblical authority

Before further consideration is given to the use of biblical texts to condemn or affirm LGBT+ people, the issue of biblical authority warrants discussion. In his introduction to the subject, William P. Brown notes that a range of meaning can be given to the concept of *authority*, but observes that a definition of the term should make reference to both *power* and *creativity*.¹⁰ Brown further considers that authority is thought of in respect of domains: in which domains can the Bible be said to be authoritative? Not with respect to scientific understanding or legal precedence, but almost certainly in the domain of morality and ethics; Brown notes that sexuality and other contemporary domains need to engage with other sources of authority.¹¹ As Charlie Bell discusses, however, any debate around Christian theology must respect the central authority of the Bible as an important aspect of God's revelation to humanity.¹²

Indeed, the Church of England traditionally considers Scripture to be one of three sources of God's revelation, which, as argued by Richard Hooker, should be taken alongside Tradition and Reason in order to interpret what God is telling us about any given subject or theme at a specific time.¹³ There are variations in how this position is followed, if at all. For example, a Calvinist perspective maintains that the Bible is the source of God's revelation with authority over the Church, to be accepted passively, and it might be argued therefore, must be taken as absolute and read without interpretation or contextualisation. Others, including Christian theologian Karl Barth, consider the Hebrew Bible as pointing towards the revelation of God fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and so see the revelation of Jesus as imperative.¹⁴ Lived experience is a further accepted aspect to interpretation which, alongside reason, means that where scientific and societal understandings change over time, the context of a biblical text needs to be reconsidered in order to ascertain its meaning for contemporary readers.¹⁵ Depending on the position held, the Bible can be viewed as inerrant, and so beyond challenge or scrutiny, or as one of a number of sources through which we can seek to understand God's revelation to humanity, making the need for careful interpretation essential.

In his ordination as a priest, this author took an oath which included acceptance of 'the faith revealed uniquely in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim

⁹ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory' in A. Thatcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.162-165.

¹⁰ W.P. BROWN 'Introduction' in W.P. Brown (ed.) *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.xii.

¹¹ W.P. BROWN 'Introduction', p.xii.

¹² C. BELL *Queer Holiness: The Gift of LGBTQI People to the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2022), p.36.

¹³ As discussed by Charlie Bell: C. BELL, *Queer Holiness*, p.41.

¹⁴ As discussed by Alister McGrath: A.E. McGRATH *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 6th edn. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), pp.111-112.

¹⁵ C. BELL *Queer Holiness*, p.13.

afresh in each generation'¹⁶ which he understands to be a charge to interpret biblical texts in ways which speak to, and which therefore recognise, the context in which he finds himself. Whilst accepting the Bible as an important source of God's revelation to humanity, this author sees an imperative to identify the context, purpose and underlying truths of biblical texts, using appropriate hermeneutical approaches, in order to affirm LGBT+ people both within the Church and in wider society. In his preaching, therefore, he promotes God's expansive love for all, including the unheard and those on the margins.

What does the Bible say about the concerns of LGBT+ Christians?

Before addressing this question, it is important to consider ways in which biblical texts can be misused. First, as Jonathan Tallon asserts, caution is needed when accepting a 'plain meaning' of Scripture; this is a concern that taking the words of a passage simply at face value ignores the context, purpose or genre of the text and so denies the text any deeper meaning: understanding is vital before there should be any attempt at application to a contemporary situation.¹⁷ Secondly, it is widely held by biblical scholars that 'proof texting' should be avoided. Proof texting is the intentional taking of a passage, phrase or idea out of its context (whether that be literary, historical or social) and using it to 'prove' a point, often with the intention of excluding, persecuting or undermining a group of 'othered' people. This is where the use of 'clobber passages' originates: the appropriation of verses from Scripture and using them to condemn the behaviour, lives and relationships of LGBT+ people. In both cases, the Bible is done a disservice when texts are misused.

There are a number of clobber passages which could be considered, but the sake of brevity key passages used against LGBT+ people will be selected here: on same-sex relationships and sexual activity (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26-27); and on intersex, transgender and non-binary gender identification (Gen. 1:27; Deut. 22:5). The wider contexts of these passages, and how contemporary understandings of sex, gender and sexuality differ from those held between the seventh century BCE and the first century CE (when these texts are likely to have been written), will be discussed.

'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination' (Lev. 18:22). Superficially, this would appear to prohibit gay men having intimate or sexual relationships. As Tallon argues, however, the context of this verse reveals far more information which is needed to form a valid interpretation. Firstly, Leviticus contains a 'holiness code', of which this verse was part, written around 600 BCE to encourage distinctiveness between the priests of the Israelites and those in the surrounding cultures. Sex with a male temple prostitute was an accepted aspect of pagan worship; this prohibition was not, therefore, intended to apply to all situations. Secondly, the understanding of sexual intercourse between males (note the use of 'male' rather than 'man') was somewhat different to our contemporary concept: pederasty (men having sex with boys up to

¹⁶ The Archbishops' Council *Common Worship: Ordination Services* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), p.6.

¹⁷ J. TALLON *Affirmative: Why you can say yes to the Bible and yes to people who are LGBTQI+* (London: Richardson Jones Press, 2023), pp.9-11.

the age of puberty) was widely practised by men of status in the Graeco-Roman world;¹⁸ this is considered immoral, and indeed is illegal, in contemporary cultures, and so whilst this verse does not prohibit what a 'conservative' might suggest, it retains a (different) moral meaning. This reading is clarified by an understanding of hegemonic biblical masculinities: 'men' were considered to be above other 'lesser' males (boys, male slaves, the unclean) and women: it is perhaps engagement in this structure which the holiness code seeks to prohibit. An application of this passage to contemporary same-sex relationships and activity is not therefore justified.

'Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another' (Rom. 1:26b-27). This passage can be used to extend the perceived condemnation of homosexual relations in Leviticus, which specifically refers to sex between males, to include condemnation of lesbian sexual relationships. Tom Hanks observes that many commentators dismiss such use of this text by making reference to Graeco-Roman practices, discussed above, but argues that the text must also be analysed in its own context.¹⁹ Hanks discusses the rhetorical structure used within the wider text to argue against 'excessive desire' and points to the importance of avoiding the human guilt of the gentiles by practising moderation; the gender of those described as having unnatural passions (which, as Tallon notes, might include oral and anal sex, sex during menstruation, or if one of the partners is infertile or too old to conceive)²⁰ is not significant, but rather that the lack of self-control – which can turn people away from the commandment to love their neighbour – is key.²¹ Again, using this passage to condemn same-sex relationships does not appear to be valid.

'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (Gen. 1:27). This verse has been used by the Church to define gender (along with biological sex) as being a God-given binary. Other God-given binaries in the created order include 'day' and 'night' (Gen. 1:5), but we know that in addition to day and night there are also 'dusk' and 'dawn' which fit neither category fully but sit in between on a spectrum of lightness and darkness.²² By considering this wider context, and applying reason to the text in this way, this verse actually recognises variations in gender and biological sex rather than condemning those who do not confirm to the proposed binary of male and female: as Tallon observes, 'God made male and female, but he also made people who are intersex and people who are transgender.'²³

'A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God' (Deut. 22:5). This verse, which appears to prohibit cross-dressing,

¹⁸ J. TALLON *Affirmative*, pp.29-33.

¹⁹ T. HANKS 'Romans' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp.606-607.

²⁰ J. TALLON *Affirmative*, pp.62-63.

²¹ T. HANKS 'Romans', p.607.

²² The Archbishops' Council *Living in Love & Faith: The Course* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), p.22.

²³ J. TALLON *Affirmative*, p.92.

is considered in detail by Deryn Guest, who makes a number of observations.²⁴ Firstly, she discusses the issue of translation: that the Hebrew text 'places far greater emphasis on the masculine subject' so that it suggests an anxiety around masculinity; further the word rendered as 'apparel' (*keli-geber*) can include weapons and tools and not only clothes, so might suggest a prohibition against women taking up weapons.²⁵ Guest's analysis continues with a debate around the use of cross-dressing in cultic worship, particularly within the Canaanite and Assyrian religions, and a concern that men might dress as women to gain access to women with whom they could commit adultery.²⁶ Whichever the intentions behind this text, Guest concludes that it does not condemn those who wear clothing traditionally worn by members of a different biological sex, and hence it cannot condemn transgender, gender-fluid, non-binary or intersex individuals.

When subjected to critical analysis, it can be demonstrated that each of these clobber passages is not being interpreted correctly when used to persecute, condemn and exclude LGBT+ Christians. A similar critical hermeneutic can be applied across such texts. The authority of the Bible has not been challenged, but rather the evaluation undertaken here shows how 'proof texting' reveals a lack of respectful critical engagement with the texts by those using them for the purposes of condemning others. Having used criticism to demonstrate some areas in which the Bible does not speak against the concerns of LGBT+ Christians, Marchal's second hermeneutic approach, 'affirmative-identifying' can now be applied to locate ideas and characters within the Bible which can speak in a positive way to LGBT+ Christians.

Gay men and lesbian couples might identify with the relationships between David and Jonathan (1 and 2 Sam.) or Ruth and Naomi (Ruth). The narrative surrounding David and Jonathan makes it clear that they engaged in a loving (probably sexual) covenanted relationship (1 Sam. 18:3-4), with David loving Jonathan more deeply than his wives (2 Sam. 1:26); their relationship also queered issues of masculinities, power and inheritance.²⁷ Mona West observes that Ruth narrates a story which 'celebrates one woman's love and devotion to another'.²⁸ Indeed, West notes that when Ruth declares her intention to remain with Naomi (Ruth 1:16-18), the words describe the most intimate relationship found in the Bible between two women; the Hebrew (*davka*) describing Ruth 'clinging' to Naomi (Ruth 1:14) is notably the same word used to describe the joining of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:24).²⁹ In these texts, 'ancestors' of LGBT+ couples in loving relationships can be identified: there are parallels between the intimate, covenanted relationships of Adam and Eve (heterosexual), David and Jonathan (same-sex males), and Ruth and Naomi (same-sex females).

²⁴ D. GUEST 'Deuteronomy' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp.103-106.

²⁵ D. GUEST 'Deuteronomy', p.103.

²⁶ D. GUEST 'Deuteronomy', pp.104-105.

²⁷ K. STONE '1 and 2 Samuel' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp.175-178; T.W. JENNINGS 'Same-Sex Relations in the Biblical World' in A. Thatcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.211-212.

²⁸ M. WEST 'Ruth' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), p.158.

²⁹ M. WEST 'Ruth', p.160.

Transgender Christians, as well as those who are intersex, gender-fluid or non-binary, might be encouraged by the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). This is a character whose intersectionality of marginalised identities is recognised by Sean D. Burke: a eunuch (an emasculated, lesser male), a foreigner, a servant (slave) to a foreign Queen. His gender identity would not confirm to a standard binary definition, but would have been recognised despite his lack of masculine characteristics.³⁰ In spite of this, he is accepted as a follower of Jesus on the strength of his faith. This sets the precedent for welcoming and including people of all gender identities within the Church.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he states that, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). Reading this text in search of LGBT+ affirmation and identification enables the reader to see the removal of binary distinctions, of interest to those using a Queer Theology hermeneutic, but also to those who do not conform to standard cis-heteronormative binary definitions, which includes on some level all LGBT+ Christians, but perhaps especially those who are transgender, intersex, gender-fluid or non-binary. Melissa Harl Sellew and Joshua M. Reno note the significance of this verse in announcing 'the collapse of oppositional binaries into harmonious unity'.³¹ More widely, this passage suggests an expansive inclusion, affirming the place of all people within the family of the Church.

Those who identify as asexual and/or aromantic might be encouraged by another passage from Paul (1 Cor. 7:8) in which he advocates staying unmarried rather than committing to a relationship; a similar message is repeated a few verses later (1 Cor. 7:25-35), recommending that virgins stay celibate. This latter passage might also speak to LGBT+ Christians who do not seek paired relationships, as the text advises against the burden of worrying about a spouse. This might suggest a positive reason for being intentionally single and/or celibate rather than compliance with a coercive, negative stance.

Of primary importance, LGBT+ Christians can turn to Jesus Christ for affirmation. Whilst the Gospels notably do not refer explicitly to LGBT+ concerns, there is a deep message of inclusion which can be inferred from Jesus' teaching, his healing ministry and his choice of companions. For example, Jesus associated with those on the margins of society, including prostitutes and tax collectors (for example, Mt. 9:10), he healed a woman with haemorrhages (Lk.8:43), people with leprosy (for example, Mk 1:40) and the male slave of a Roman Centurion (Mt. 8:5-13). Jesus also talked with a female Samaritan (Jn 4:7) and used a Samaritan as an example of one who loved his neighbour (Lk. 10:25-37). In all of these cases, Jesus showed love and care for those who would have been excluded from society: it is a likely conclusion, therefore, that he would have accepted LGBT+ people³² if (according to our modern understanding) there were LGBT+ people

³⁰ S.D. BURKE 'Acts of the Apostles' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp.589-590.

³¹ M. HARL SELLEW and J.M. RENO 'Galatians' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp.651-652.

³² J. TALLON *Affirmative*, pp.43-44.

present. Indeed, the 'Centurion's Lad', as Theodore W. Jennings describes him, was likely to be the Centurion's young lover (the Greek word *pais* is used, which suggests this interpretation) and so in healing him, Jesus could be argued to have supported same-sex partners.³³ Robert E. Shore-Goss suggests a further insight into Jesus' possible affirmation of LGBT+ people and relationships drawn from John's Gospel (esp. Jn 13-17; 19:26-27; 20:1-10; 21:20-24): the Beloved Disciple, whose intimacy with Jesus, his singling-out for private conversations and his deeper understanding of Jesus, as well as his joining with Jesus' mother at the crucifixion, all point towards the possibility of a same-sex relationship between Jesus and his (male) beloved.³⁴ Whilst recognising that this might be a difficult interpretation for some, Shore-Goss points to the conclusions which are likely to have been drawn had the Beloved Disciple been female, and notes that gay men in particular have long been drawn to the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple for affirmation and acceptance.³⁵

Having criticised the concept of proof-texting in conservatives' use of clobber passages, this author is aware that it could be argued that he has carried out the same process, but from an alternative perspective. As a safeguard against this, the hermeneutic of Biblical Theology has been applied: Brevard Childs defines one purpose of Biblical Theology as a constructive approach in which the reader traces the unity of Scripture, identifying overarching themes and ideas within the various narratives and other texts.³⁶ In the selection of the texts discussed above, the Biblical themes of God's love, desire for relationship, and inclusion of those on the margins have been traced, and it is hoped that the texts can be seen to all fit within this wider approach.

Conclusion

A number of issues of concern shared by (some or many) LGBT+ Christians have been considered, and the 'clobber passages' used to condemn and exclude LGBT+ people have been explored, using a range of hermeneutic approaches. The authority of the Bible has been considered, and this author has argued that his commitment as a priest in the Church of England requires him both to respect Scripture and also to interrogate texts to identify underlying truths in a way which affirms the lives and identities of all of God's children. The question of how the Bible actually speaks to LGBT+ identities and concerns has then been explored, with a number of examples of affirming characters, narratives and themes identified.

For this author, it is evident that the Bible speaks to LGBT+ people in an affirming, positive way. He must therefore conclude that, contrary to the views of 'conservatives', biblical authority is not challenged or undermined by an affirming reading. Indeed, the Bible is served better by the application of tradition, reason and experience to gain a deeper, informed understanding, which can form a more rounded interpretation: through the removal of binary, cis-heteronormative filters, the Bible can be freed to speak its truth into our

³³ T.W. JENNINGS 'Same-Sex Relations in the Biblical World', p.213.

³⁴ R.E. SHORE-GOSS 'John' in M. West and R.E Shore-Goss (eds.) *The Queer Bible Commentary*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), p.575.

³⁵ R.E. SHORE-GOSS 'John', pp.575-576.

³⁶ B.S. CHILDS *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.3-9.

contemporary context. It has therefore been demonstrated that the concerns of LGBT+ Christians and biblical authority are not mutually exclusive.

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