

The Church and Homosexuality in Ghana: A Critical Biblical and Theological Review

Abstract

Sex is the loftiest expression of human feelings from which we draw out satisfaction of life. It must therefore be well and carefully thought of, and communicated. Thus, in the context of human explication, sex is such an inexhaustible mystery, which attracts, and will continue to attract fresh explorers. The Church stigmatised almost every form of human sexuality including masturbation, fornication, homosexuality, transvestism and adultery and considered them as sin. Some of these teachings of the Church were however not resulted from any particular teaching of Jesus Christ but were adopted into Christianity by the Doctors of the Western Church who were reflecting on issues of their own time and in the process imbued in millions of people today a guilt of feeling that does not necessarily correspond to modern understanding of sexuality. This hostility towards sex is not so much part of biblical Christianity as it is perceived as a major component of Christian theology. This is because Christianity appeared in a world dominated by the expansionist Roman Empire which had adopted and incorporated into its own intellectual tradition much of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism and Greek philosophy and ethics. This paper moves to submit that all human sexual orientations originated from God and that the Bible does not provide a basis for the kind of contempt with which the church had so often treated same-sex individuals in Ghana.

Key words: Bible, culture, homosexuality, sex, relationship, love, choice.

Introduction

Homosexuality is defined as sexual attraction to those of the same sex be it male and male or female and female sexual relationship (Kunhiyop, 2008). According to Krook (1959) ecclesiastical pronouncements with regards to human sexuality over the years show an anti-sensual ambivalence. This is because the Church disapproves of any sexual expression outside of man and woman marital sexual relations. This position of the Church in the explication of Krook stems from religious and philosophical orthodoxy and official doctrines of the Christian Church. In addition, a vast majority of psychological research presented homosexuality as a form of pathology, with lesbians and

gay men characterised as deviants and sick products of society (Coyle and Kitzinger, 2002). It is also worth noting the argument against homosexuality that it spreads sexually transmitted infections (STIs) very rapidly especially, HIV/AIDS.

With regards to the foregoing, Sprinkle and Holmes (2016) argue that no issue is hotter and more divisive for the Church today than homosexuality. Hence, De Young (2015) cautioned that we engage the subject of homosexuality with regards to the Christian faith in a manner that honours Christ and gives hope to a watching world. According to Allberry (2013), engaging honourably on the issue of homosexuality will help to reduce the growing hostility towards people of different sexual orientation outside the heterosexual paradigm by answering the question is God homophobic?

The study was conducted using theological and hermeneutical tools involving the Bible, Bible commentaries, sermons, church communiqués and other scholarly and exegetical materials to engage the subject under review. By doing so, the study brings the Bible into a careful conversation with historical Christian traditions and systematic theological persuasions. I also conducted interviews for pastors and church members to test the doctrinal hypothesis with regards to the Bible's objection to homosexuality. Thus using the aforementioned theological and hermeneutical tools, I have critically examined homosexuality from a Christian theological stand point within the context of Ghana, highlighting possible implications of the rejection of homosexuality for the Church in Ghana.

In effect, the study seeks to establish the veracity of the claim that homosexuality is unbiblical, sinful, immoral, abomination, and affront to Christianity. The article therefore presented a logical conclusion on how the church should respond to homosexuality.

Bible and Homosexuality

For centuries, people of faith have not communicated (much) about sex because it was thought of as filthy, evil and culturally inappropriate. There are different religious beliefs about the nature of sexuality and the appropriateness of sexual behaviours. Within any one particular religious tradition there are often multiple approaches to sexual issues. In Christianity, we have evangelicals and conservatives; Catholics and Protestants; as well as Charismatics and Pentecostals with varying levels of agreement or disagreement with regards to historical teachings and practices of the Church regarding human sexuality.

Having said this, let me first establish the fact that the first sexual encounter occurred outside the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve after the couple were banished from the Garden of Eden by God in Genesis 3: 23. In Genesis 4:1, the Bible records that Adam knew Eve his wife and she became pregnant. From this biblical quotation, we can infer that religion provides the grounds for sexual discourse and intercourse because ever since this earliest sexual encounter between Adam and Eve, human beings have always been expressing their sexual feelings differently. But somehow, the creation account of a man and a woman developed a hermeneutical argument in some religious circles for exclusive heterosexuality as the divine paradigm or pattern or model for human sexuality.

Assuming, as being speculated by most Christians that God created a man and a woman for procreation is something to entertain at all; does it mean that sex is exclusively for child birth? Is it the case that all human sexual intercourse result-or must result-or intend to result in the production of biological off-springs? How can we justify God's intention of creating a man and a woman as the basis for exclusive male and female sexual relationship? Why has God not created us as robots without free will to choose? This paper therefore seeks to argue that with science and technology advancing so rapidly on human sexuality, sooner than later, sex will be engaged solely for pleasure and not for procreation as designer babies (IVF) will become the norm and pattern for procreation in the world.

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) Chapter IX, God endued the will of humans with that natural liberty that is neither forced nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined good or evil and that human beings in their state of innocence had freedom and power to "Will" and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God. The Confession therefore concludes that human "Will" is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone, in the state of glory only.

Having critically analysed the foregoing Creedal and confessional Statement, I was moved to submit that all sexual orientations originated from God and that the use of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as the basis for God's dislike for same-sex romantic expressions is rather misleading. This argument had been necessitated due to the simple fact that even before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it was documented that God once destroyed the whole world except Noah's family and some spices (Gen 6-8). The question that one was tempted to ask was, was the destruction of the world by God during Noah's time due to the prevalence of homosexuality as being speculated in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Arguably, biblical account does not suggest that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexual behaviours but “because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it” (Gen 19:13). This was the verdict pronounced by the angels of destruction. The “outcry” could be as the result of increasing oppression, corruption, wickedness, sexual immorality or injustice, among other things as outlined against the people of Noah’s era (Gen 6:1-7). This is more so because, similar account (as those of Sodom and Gomorrah) about a town called Gibeah in Judges 19:22-30 did not result in its destruction. In addition, according to the African Bible Commentary (2006), the men of Sodom did not know what kind of visitors were in Lot’s house. If that was the case, then it presupposes that their mission could have been misconstrued by Lot.

The forgoing is not meant to underestimate other hermeneutical readings and interpretations of the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19. According to the narrative, the men wanted Lot to bring out his guests “so we may know them”. The Hebrew word for “know” is *yada*. According to Gagnon (2002) the word *yada* has been interpreted by liberal scholars to mean “to get acquainted with” rather than “having sexual intercourse with” as used in other contexts in the Torah such as Genesis 4:1. Opponents of this theoretical perspective on the Sodom and Gomorrah story however argue that Lot’s response to the request of the intruding men gives a clue about sex. The question one dares to ask is did Lot really understand the intention of the “sex demanding” men? It is therefore difficult to see how prohibition laws against homosexuality arrived because of the Sodom and Gomorrah biblical account. It is in the light of this that in the views of Helma (2011) the concept of Queer theology hopes to bring about a more just, humane and liberating manifestation of Christianity for all humanity, both queers and non-queers alike.

Elsewhere, Saint Paul, too, was read as being opposed to same-sex relationships. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11, Paul indicates that “neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God; while in Romans 1:27, he condemned men “committing shameless acts with men,” as well as women who “exchange natural relations for unnatural”.

According to the study, Paul’s argument in the above scriptural quotations is a misrepresentation when considered to be a condemnation for gentile same-sex behaviours. This is because the texts only show Paul’s condemnation for any form of self-righteousness or perceived salvation on the basis of human works or merit.

One thing must be made clear in this article. That is no words of Jesus were reported on the subject of same-sex relations, and that the writers of the Bible are products of their own culture. When the Old Testament stated that one should not lie with a male as with a woman because it is an abomination (Leviticus 18: 22), does the text give who is this practice abominable to? I suspect to the Jewish culture which abhors homosexuality because the writer did not present God neither as the subject nor the object of this Law. Also, one is tempted to argue that the law against lying with a male as with a woman bothers on posture rather than the act of sexual intercourse. This is because it is obvious that literally a man cannot have sexual intercourse with a man at exactly the same sexual position or posture as with a woman which often generally requires the application of the missionary or traditional basic style or posture (perhaps practiced by the Jews) unless perhaps the man involved is transgendered. So, the article fundamentally argues that Paul's contention on the subject of homosexuality essentially stems from his Judaic and legalistic background and not based on any teachings of the Lord.

In the light of the aforesaid, the paper argues that even if at creation God approved heterosexuality straight, it is not out of God's nature that he will act differently later, because, according to the perceived nature of God explicated in the Westminster Confession of Faith cited in the foregoing, God can always act against God's own sovereign "Will" at any given time in history to achieve God's divinely ordained purpose.

The Church and Homosexuality in Ghana

In Ghana, homosexuality in any form is perceived both culturally as a taboo and constitutionally illegal according to "popular and legal" interpretations of the Criminal Offences Act-1960 (Act 29) Section-104 on Unnatural Carnal Knowledge punishable by imprisonment with hard labour up to 3 years.

Similarly, the major religions-Traditional African Religion, Christianity and Islam have all opposed gay tendencies with Christianity and Islam basing their argument on sacred Scriptures. As such, people caught in the act of homosexuality were brutalised, humiliated and often banished entirely from their communities and churches.

I have taken my time to analyse volumes of church communiqués and sermons preached by many recognised pastors across Pentecostal and mainline denominations and have established the fact that sermons were deliberately used as a tool in the fight against homosexuality in Ghana. They targeted same-sex relationships and portrayed them as deviants, evil, satanic and hell-bound.

In an interview with the Most Reverend Joseph Osei-Bonsu on 28th September 2015 in his capacity as the president of the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference, he opined that all homosexuals and lesbians are not bound for heaven. According to him, homosexuality is not natural and that the argument that some people were born gays or lesbians is only a ploy by gay rights activists to defend the immoral and unbiblical act. He argues that such a defence of gayism was only intended to further a hidden political and sociological agenda. By alluding to Romans 1:6ff, the learned bishop advances his theological argument further by stating that both gays and advocates of same-sex unions or marriages are equally guilty before God.

It came to be known during the search for information for the paper that the Anglican Church in Ghana had threatened to cut ties with the world wide Anglican Communion during the 2014 Lambeth Conference held in Canterbury in the United Kingdom because of their opposition to the Communion's soft stance on gayism. A more radical one was the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) under the leadership of its sitting moderator, a well-known anti-gay activist, Rt. Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Martey, who severed ecumenical partnership ties with the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom and the Presbyterian Church, USA (PC-USA) over the acceptance of gay marriage and ordination. Thus homosexuality in any form is considered by the church in Ghana as evil, satanic, and a violation of God's law governing sex.

However, the paper argues that if human sexual engagement should exclusively be the intercourse of vagina and penis involving a man and a woman then any anal sexual encounter involving a man and a woman equally amounts to "homosexuality". It came to light during the field research that most men especially the youth usually have sex with their wives and partners through the woman's anus; which they often times considered adventurous and pleasurable. One therefore wonders if this practice of inter-gender anal sexual intercourse does not constitute "homosexuality" in the eyes of anti-homosexual Christians.

It can be deduced from the aforementioned that the church in Ghana is cultural bounded. As such, a substantial amount of its teachings have been greatly influenced by the indigenous cultural imperatives/practices and belief systems and moral and ethical value systems. Thus, in most cases the interaction between culture and gospel leads to doctrinal hybridisation that results in syncretism. The question is can the church separate its biblical teachings from cultural sanctions and presuppositions to avoid stigmatising, persecuting and in some cases excommunicating homosexuals? Or are homosexuals worse than those that practice any of the seven deadly sins

formulated during the sixth century, namely lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, vengeance, envy and pride? What about those outlined by Paul in Galatians 5:19-21? What about the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20? Who should cast the first stone?

The questions raised in the preceding paragraph suggests that rather than creating disharmony in the society with its antagonising tendencies against people of different sexual orientations, the church ought be more concerned about the fundamental unity of the human family on earth in accordance with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Parliament of the World Religions Human Rights of the United Nations. By so doing, the church would be steadfast on its mission of promoting a better global order for the realisation of peace, justice, and the protection of the earth (Dell'Olio and Simon, 2010).

The paper therefore submits that what God wants from God's people is for them to worship God, be God's friends, and communion with God and other creatures of God (Hauerwas and Wells, 2006). This, the church must enforce through faithful biblical hermeneutics and effective social engagement.

In summary, the study reiterates the fact that sex is the most extraordinary expression of human feelings that gives us satisfaction of intimacy. Nevertheless, the church over the centuries classified some sexual behaviours such as homosexuality as sinful. Thus, the paper argues that the hostility towards homosexuals did not originate from any particular teaching of Jesus Christ. As such, biblically and theologically speaking, the article posits that all human sexual orientations originated from God and that the Bible did not restrict us from engaging in any particular style of sexual act or gratification as had been the argument for heterosexuality over the years. Hence, the paper logically concludes that different Sexual orientations aside the heterosexual paradigm should be permissible without any stigmatisation when expressed within the context of bond of love.

Conclusion

The article had established that the act of homophobia is a cultural creation and that if the Bible was to be written within a homo-friendly society such as Britain and the United States of America today, things would have been different. The problem of the African Christian is the projection of moral excesses using cultural paradigms to the extent that one's cultural background and religious interactions become the major factors that influence their sexuality.

The paper further maintains that the uses and misuses of Scripture in relation to sexuality is a problem for the church in Africa today. There is therefore the need to acknowledge the culture-boundedness of Scripture and its interpreters. This is because the study establishes that neither Old nor New Testament provides a basis for the kind of contempt with which the church had so often treated same-sex individuals in Ghana.

However, the article posits that sexuality as a gift can be misused due to cultural and religious misinformation and bad communication because, as early on opined, religion plays vitally a large role in shaping attitudes about sexuality as some religions prescribe acceptable sexual behaviours. Yet, even though, most religious traditions regard sex as spiritual and sacred, many people find that they are not able to accept such religious doctrines in the light of the changes society is experiencing today.

In conclusion, the article submits with academic rigor and depth that expelling homosexuals from the Church constitutes a dismemberment of the body of Christ since the Church is the body of Christ according to 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. This therefore calls for pastoral accommodation of homosexuals by offering positively liberating way forward with regards to their involvement in the life of the Church.

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