

Vision Document Homosexuality and Homosexual Relations

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Vision Document “Homosexuality and Homosexual Relations”¹

I HOMOSEXUALITY IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Across the breadth of the churches opinions on homosexuality and homosexual relations are widely divergent. The one church unconditionally rejects homosexual behaviour; the other views homosexual inclination as a variant within creation and consecrates same-sex marriages.

These differences in opinion are not divorced from developments in society. One such development is that, more than ever before, people determine what it is that will make their lives meaningful. The quest to do the will of God plays little, if any, role in this. Traditional bonds are no longer authoritative.

The change in the orientation of life is also evident in the matter of sexuality. Especially since the “Sixties” of the previous century, profound changes have taken place. More and more, sexuality has become an independent area, no longer closely bound to procreation. Sexual intercourse and the receiving of children are connected only when so desired.

Furthermore, people today have great expectations of happiness and sexual pleasure within an intimate relationship. Such a relationship is not necessarily made for life; in fact, it can be very short. Gradually, sexual intercourse has been loosened from the notion of marriage between a man and a woman. A wide variety of promiscuity is now common. According to prevailing culture, sexual activity in every form and context is possible and permitted as long as no one is hurt. That means that a line is still drawn at children and incest.

Generally, an intimate relationship no longer has the force of a covenant made with another or with The Other. A promise of life-long unconditional fidelity is no longer considered essential. The road to happiness is opened by equality and reciprocity between the partners. A lifetime of faithfulness to and care for each other is pushed into the background. At most, an agreement of mutual respect – which may or may not be formalized –governs sexual relationships.

¹ Translation of *Visiedocument ‘Homoseksualiteit en Homoseksuele Relaties’*, a report prepared for the General Synod 2013 of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK) in the Netherlands. The original document, including extensive footnotes not included in this translation, is available at <http://www.cgk.nl/index.php?generalesynode>. This translation by Carl A. Schouls, May 2014, is authorized by Deputaten Buitenlandse Kerken of the CGK. Scripture quotations and references are taken from *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, Nashville, Nelson 1982.

In addition, it is generally believed that a certain lifestyle of sexual mores does not make anyone a better or worse person. Sexuality has been placed beyond the sphere of good and evil. Meanwhile, society accuses the church of being ensnared in this sphere of good-and-evil, and that from antiquity it has surrounded sexuality with prohibitions. To this day, people regard with suspicion whatever the church may bring forth on this subject. To an extent this is understandable, considering the hypocrisy and abuse which, regrettably, has more than once surfaced in the church.

One of the effects of the profound changes in the area of sexuality is the widely held acceptance of sexual relations between persons of the same gender. The Dutch government stimulates this acceptance and has made marriage available to homosexual couples. It supports the desires of citizens who autonomously desire to set their life pattern; it creates the possibilities for this.

This general acceptance of same-sex relationships has resulted in a major shift in the life patterns of men and women of homosexual orientation. No longer do they live in hiding. For centuries they were marginalized. They were persecuted; at best, tolerated. Till deep into the nineteenth century society focused almost exclusively on homosexual activity and the harm it would bring about for man and society. During this time the psychological dimension of this behaviour began to be studied. This behaviour was criminalized by law. No attention was paid to what might be underlying causes. The term "homosexuality" was coined. Initially, the cause of homosexuality was sought in a mental disorder which would then require psychiatric treatment. Later it was increasingly seen that a same-sex orientation can be indissolubly interwoven with the personality.

These new insights contributed to removing homosexual intercourse from the domain of criminal law. Gradually such people received wide acceptance in society. Presently large sections of the general population regard a homosexual relationship as normal. The same rights are accorded to a marriage of same-sex couples as to a marriage between a man and a woman. Examples of such are adoption rights and foster parents rights.

The road to acceptance of same-sex relations has a militant dimension, manifesting itself in the "homo-movement" which has been openly active for several decades. This movement aims not only at promoting contacts between homosexuals but also at opposing and attacking traditional views of morality. The new morality here in view places the right to self-determination central: man is his own project. According to many today, the problem is not homosexuality but homophobia.

These developments do not bypass the churches and, unmistakably, exert influence on church members. This influence causes views to change. Opinions held to be valid in the past are no

longer self-evident. All too often this creates estrangement between brothers and sisters of the same house, resulting in a sphere of suspicion. Anyone who should wish to give some room for a homosexual relationship in love and fidelity is quickly suspected of unfaithfulness to the Scriptures and denial of the truth. Anyone who allows no room for such a relationship is *a priori* accused of being loveless and cruel. Emotions can run high in this process of polarization.

As a result of these tensions and differences of opinion, churches and church members live in confusion. This confusion is keenly felt by the brothers and sisters directly concerned. Sometimes they feel trapped between their deepest feelings and their loyalty to their church.

In the past, such brothers and sisters were often unfairly treated, resulting in damaged self-esteem. We, who have drawn up this document, wish to sympathize with those who have discovered that they have a different sexual orientation. This orientation as such will cause them difficulty. They experience that they do not live up to the expectations that their environment has of them and which they held themselves. This experience can evoke denial, resistance, anger and depression.

No doubt, many have gone through shorter or longer stages during which they kept their feelings hidden and were unable to share them with anyone. They may have followed the way of many of their age group: dating or courtship with a member of the other sex and subsequent marriage. Through the pressure they have experienced, some have landed in a dark circuit. They have a right to our sympathy. We are committed to those who are submerged in such difficulties. We also feel compassion for those who, going through a deep valley of frustration and anxiety have, by trial and error, found a way of life in the light of the Gospel. We strongly reject the idea that someone who, to a lesser or greater degree, has homosexual feelings or a corresponding orientation, would be less than any other. The mere fact that this thought can arise within us makes us guilty before God.

Reflection is more than necessary. Many look for guidance in the midst of all this uncertainty. Some seek for guidance in the past. They very much prefer to return to or to hold on to a time when, as they see it, everything was clear and clearly structured. Others have less trouble with unanswered questions. They attempt to relativize the issue: why place so much emphasis on homosexuality while it seems the Bible pays little or no attention to it but often speaks, for example, of the sin of greed.

Neither way is one the church can follow. She believes and confesses that her basis lies elsewhere, namely in the word of her King. Also in questions about homosexuality and same-sex relationships, she wants to live by the standard of that Word. That is her guideline and measure of faith and life.

The perpetration of any kind of physical, psychological or verbal violence against homosexuals is to be detested. Violence takes place where there is no reverence and respect for the humanity of the other. Filthy jokes also hurt others. Certainly, people may have an opinion about the lifestyle and life practice of another but that opinion should not lead to a diminution of the other. We should also keep our distance from an attitude that denies the existence of homosexuality.

Even though they took position, in 2010 our churches did not accede to a request to sign a statement decrying violence against homosexuals. Deputies representing our churches, who received this request, felt that we should not isolate violence against homosexuals from so many other forms of violence that are equally objectionable.

A second reason was the fact that our churches have great reservations with respect to the manner in which any of the promoters for this undertaking had conducted himself during the course of the years in his struggle for acceptance of homosexuality. Taking into account the manner in which this statement as then presented came into existence, it would have been difficult or even impossible to make our own voice clear to the churches.

II TERMINOLOGY

Confusion can easily occur in reflecting on homosexuality and same-sex relationships. Clarification of concepts can prevent possible misunderstandings.

Homosexual feelings indicate sexual feelings for someone of the same sex. The term “homosexuality” goes back to the words *homos* and *sexus*. *Homos* is a Greek word that means “the same”. *Sexus* comes from Latin and means “sex”. When such feelings are permanent, we are talking about “inclination”. This inclination is a mental and physical state that someone has usually developed from childhood, on the basis of a natural predisposition. Other words that can indicate this are “preference”, “orientation” or “nature”. But that last word is somewhat problematic. More about that will follow.

The number of men and women who live with a homosexual orientation from earliest childhood is less than is sometimes suggested. In 2010, in a representative survey among the Dutch population, people were asked about which gender had their sexual preference. This showed that three percent of men and one percent of women felt attracted exclusively to their own sex. Six percent of men and 15 percent of women are somewhat or as much attracted to their own gender. This last group, which can be classified as bisexual, is therefore larger than those whose sexual preference is directed exclusively to their own sex.

Behaviors and sexual activity can be better researched than feelings. Researchers report that three percent of the male population in The Netherlands has had sexual relations exclusively with their own sex, and one percent of the female population. Ten percent of the male population reports intercourse with both sexes. Twelve percent of the female population had intercourse with both sexes.

It is possible that someone has a homosexual orientation without expressing it in sexual intercourse with a person of the same sex. The reverse is also possible: some search for homosexual intercourse without being specifically attracted to a person of the same sex. They may do that, for example, because they want to shift their limits in the field of sexuality.

There is often talk about a homosexual “nature”. The problem with this word is the suggestion posed. It suggests that the orientation is strongly biologically determined. What may then be easily ignored is the fact that in the development of sexual preference mental and emotional factors may also play a role. In addition, the term “nature” provides a rather massive loading regarding to the notion of sexual preference, as if it would be either one or the other. It is a bit more nuanced. The borders between homosexuality and heterosexuality sometimes overlap.

The word “nature” assumes too sharp a dichotomy between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

Scientists have come to regard sexual orientation as a phenomenon that consists of multiple dimensions. A well-known model distinguishes seven dimensions: sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, lifestyle and sexual identification. Using this model, people can have identical scores in all dimensions and still be totally focussed upon the other sex. But it can also provide different results. The model takes into account that experiences can change over time.

An enlightening distinction is the one between feelings, orientation and identity. Homosexual feelings may occur in varying degrees and at different moments. They may also be transient. As mentioned, we speak of a homosexual orientation when these feelings are of a stable character. We could speak of a homosexual identity when someone allows his orientation to be determinative for his being a person and thus lets his sexual preference profile him.

Homosexual feelings and orientation mean that someone knows himself attracted to a person of his own sex rather than a person of the opposite sex. He feels emotionally safer and more secure with those of his own sex. The physical appearance of someone of the same sex usually creates a greater impression than that of the other sex. It may also play a role in erotic attraction. Another layer in this sexual orientation is the desire for physical contact. Every person usually has need for touch and proximity to another. This can also go further and lead to sexuality in the narrower sense. It is good to make a proper distinction between appreciation for the body of another person and the actual desire of that body.

When we speak in the remainder of this vision document about homosexuality, we mean the feelings for or the orientation towards the same sex, not explicit intimate sexual activity. If the latter is meant, then that will be identified by terms such as “act”, “activity”, “behavior” or “intercourse”.

III BACKGROUNDS

1. Biological Factors

From of old man has sought an explanation for homosexual feelings. This happened in the ancient world. Both ancient Greece as well as other cultures were familiar with relations between people of the same sex. But the ancients were also familiar with the phenomenon that some had a deep seated, strong inner preference for the same sex. Writers of classical antiquity pointed to supernatural and medical causes, amongst others.

Up until the end of the nineteenth century our western society generally viewed homosexuality as sinful and a criminal offence. Later people talked about it being a treatable disease. From the twentieth century on, reasons have been sought in psychological causes and social/environmental conditions.

In the current debate it is especially biological factors that increasingly play a roll. Changing scientific viewpoints have contributed to a wide acceptance of sexual relations between people of the same sex.

Biological theories generally emphasize the innateness of a homosexual orientation. The scientific quest for biological causes started as recently as the 1950's. Since that time, researchers have sought the cause of this orientation in hormones, brains, genes, or a combination thereof. A hormonal explanation assumes that gay men are less "masculine" due to a pre-natal lack of the hormone testosterone. In contrast, lesbians would have been made masculine under the pre-natal influence of the same hormone. Scientists point to experiments with animals: influences on their hormonal structure have an effect on their sexual behavior. Later research on the endocrine systems of gay men has not led to unambiguous results.

Other studies suggest anatomical differences between the brains of homosexual and heterosexual men. The first investigations into this area were made in the 1980's. A certain portion of the brain of homosexual men was found to be larger than of other men. Some researchers believe that the brains of these men have developed this way during their fetal stage and under the influence of certain hormones.

The study of the gene patterns of homosexual men is of more recent date. This research has focused particularly on families with gay members and twins. It is assumed that genetic material creates a homosexual development; however, a "homo-gene" has never been found. The way in which genetic material promotes homosexual development is unclear; however, it is

thought possible that there is a complex process in which, in addition to genetic make-up, endocrine factors and the structure of the brain play a role.

2. Psychological Factors

Predating the search for biological factors is the search for psychological factors. These factors may include learned behavior and the influence of the social environment. Sometimes theories point to a disorder in the development from child to adult. An understanding of these explanatory models may be helpful in understanding one's own personhood. For example, it makes a difference if, in a specific case, a homosexual orientation is a biological given or the result of an imbalance in childhood.

The search for psychological factors began with the work of Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts at the end of the nineteenth century. Psychoanalysis seeks the cause of a homosexual orientation in a disturbed mental development of the child on its way to adulthood. This disruption might occur when the father is absent or commits hostile acts against his son. An excessively dominant mother can also play a role. She might make it difficult for her son to achieve independence from her. A similar process would occur in girls.

Later theories in the school of psychoanalysis are in line with the thought that homosexuality develops in early childhood. These theories have their own accents. Gerard van den Aardweg focuses on self-pity and feelings of inferiority. Other theories place more emphasis on a disturbed relationship between the child and the parent of the same gender. It seeks compensation for a loss suffered. That search process can lead to the development of a homosexual orientation.

Another explanation model is drawn from social learning theory. In general a learning theory assumes that someone learns behavior through a process of punishment and reward. One such theory is *behaviorism*. Homosexuality could develop where in the case of a boy, feminine behavior is reinforced and with a girl, masculine behavior is promoted. A pleasant homosexual experience at puberty or adolescence might also contribute to such development.

Social learning theory puts the accent on "modelling" whereby a person assumes a particular behavior through observing, imitating and identifying with it. Such learning processes enhance positive feelings in relation to a person of the same sex and form the self-image. That self-image is strengthened when difficulties are encountered upon entering into a relationship with someone of the opposite sex.

This system of punishment and reward effects also operates at a societal level: a society that tolerates and empowers homosexual behavior will show an increase in that behavior while a punitive culture will have an inhibitory effect on it.

Developmental psychology gives attention to psychological factors that contribute to the development of a homosexual orientation. It highlights the stage of adolescence or puberty. According to many, this phase is crucial for the formation of one's identity. This is the stage at which some have their first clearly homosexual experiences. Generally, these occur within the framework of experimental behavior and are usually of a transient nature.

Studies within the field of psychology have come up with developmental models concerning homosexual orientation and identity. Anyone who experiences homosexual feelings undergoes a process. In this process of '*coming out*' he must learn how to deal with those feelings. A well-known model distinguishes four phases. Not everyone will pass through all these phases systematically or deal with all its aspects. It is clear that the culture in which someone lives affects the course of this process. This model does, however, mark important points of development.

The first phase is that of awareness (*sensitization*). This usually takes place in the period prior to puberty. The child experiences that he is different from his peers, but does not yet attribute this to homosexual feelings. In the second phase the child recognizes feelings. Because these feelings do not match his self-image it creates *confusion*.

This confusion can be strengthened by views on homosexuality in the private environment and culture. The child may react differently to these. He may accept, reject, or deny these feelings. The way in which a child handles them has a definite influence on how he will function. Often the third phase, the *adoption* of his sexual orientation, takes place during late adolescence. Typically, the adolescent does this by telling others. Although the environment tolerates this self-designation, the adolescent or young adult does not yet fully accept this because of his uncertainty. The experience acquired at this stage will influence his later dealings with his sexuality. For example, should he get many negative comments, this will reinforce his negative thoughts on homosexuality.

Finally, in the fourth phase, homosexual feelings are experienced as something unique, peculiar to him, part of "This is who I am". He grows in accepting his own preference (*commitment*). According to this model, openness about this preference and entering into homosexual relationships will promote the growth to wholeness of the person. Going through the above phases does not mean that a phase is forever closed. Negative feelings can permanently affect the life of a homosexual person.

In addition to this model, there are other models that outline how people deal with homosexual feelings; however, none of these models is undisputed. For example, an objection is that they do not take into account those who make a considered choice not to accept their homosexual identity and consciously do not let their sexual orientation determine their identity. They don't want to wear the label of "Gay" nor belong to the social group "homosexuals". That is possible: to recognize the personal orientation, while at the same time have their life pattern determined by an orientation other than this one. Faith and religion can cause someone to renounce their homosexual identity. There are also developmental differences between women and men with same-gender orientation.

A very different approach sees in a homosexual way of life an expression of resistance and rebellion against the established order. That approach was especially popular in the 1960's. The starting point here was that homosexual behavior is not something that happens to people, but it is the result of a conscious choice. There was a strong emphasis on the human will. The will should be above every biological and psychological category. According to this view, man is an autonomous operator who chooses in freedom. He sets his own a law, designs his own life and arranges the world in his own image. A homosexual lifestyle is a sign of liberation from oppressive structures, an act of independence and a protest against society. That lifestyle is also a means through which people can shift boundaries and experiment with new modes of sexuality. Being homosexual thus becomes a socially-critical statement. This thought is still present today.

3. Possibility of Change?

Arising from these different explanatory models, a search has been made for the possibility of redirecting of homosexual orientation to a heterosexual one. Therapies have been developed with this in view. From a biological approach this has been tried with hormone treatments. Within behavioral therapies methods have been developed with a view to behavioral change; within psychoanalysis methods of psychotherapy have been used. Treatment that is premised on a disturbed relationship between the child and the parent of the same gender is aimed at supplementing what the child may have missed in his development. Here, a person of the same gender temporarily, in a non-sexual relationship, assumes the role of the parent, giving the child whose development has been disrupted an opportunity to as yet grow to maturity. Various forms of treatment have also been given a place in the field of Christian social work. In addition, through this type of support, attention is paid to fostering growth in strength to resist temptation in this area.

In general, someone who has had a homosexual orientation from an early age cannot or can hardly change. This may be different where this orientation results from experiences or events in puberty or adolescence. In such cases, change cannot always be excluded.

Although behavior and attitude are in many ways changeable and malleable, in the practice of our culture that is not so easy. A shift in sexual orientation is often difficult, for many even beyond discussion and in many cases not possible.

4. Evaluation

Previously we laid out some aspects of a scientific explanation for the emergence of a homosexual orientation. Broadly, we can identify two approaches to investigating the causes of this orientation: nature and nurture. The word “nature” refers to a combination of genetic predisposition and biological environmental factors. With that last element we can think of a changed level of the hormone testosterone during pregnancy. “Nature” can also refer to a possible difference in brain structure. The combination of genetic predisposition and biological environmental factors leads or may lead to the emergence of certain brain structures. On the other hand, the word “nurture” refers to factors such as education, people-to-people contacts, social and cultural conditions. With regard to the emergence of a homosexual orientation, scientists continue speak of a complex interaction between nature and nurture. This report does not take a position in this ongoing scientific debate.

Some explanatory models are very forcefully presented, but still lack certainty. That is the case, for example, in research conducted on the brains of deceased men who had lived a homosexual lifestyle. That research discovered an aberrant brain structure. The question is whether these men were born with this aberration or did part of their brain develop more strongly due to their lifestyle? There is still much uncertainty in this regard. Given the current state of knowledge, a clear relationship between cause and effect cannot be demonstrated. It is better to speak of possible influences on the emergence of a homosexual orientation. Each of the above factors has an impact. There will be no single factor. Certainly, there is a complex interaction.

The current debate on homosexuality asserts quite strongly, however, that particular biological factors contribute to the development of a homosexual orientation. This would be as natural as eye colour, skin colour or left-handedness. If so, people may and must act in accordance with their nature. Nature determines doing and acting. According to this way of thinking, whoever has a homosexual orientation, is entitled and obliged to live his life accordingly. Anyone who lives contrary to this nature would harm himself. No one may hamper the self-development of

one who may have a different orientation. Talk of 'controlling emotions' would be setting up a stumbling block for being genuinely human. Rather, people need to be properly assisted in the actual interaction with their "natural" orientation in a hostile environment, and they must be made resilient against expressions of homophobia.

To some extent this is true. Being and acting are closely linked. Many express their homosexual orientation in their way of talking and acting, dressing and walking, thinking and feeling. They might look with more intensity at the beauty of the body of a person of their own sex.

However, the physical and psychological constitution is no standard for doing and acting. After all, do we not have a will? Can we not choose to want – or not want – to do certain things? People are responsible for the way they deal with their constitution. It is precisely with this in view that the Church believes and confesses that not our nature is normative, but the Word of our God is.

To find the way amid all the questions that exist surrounding this subject of homosexuality, we must carefully listen to that Word.

IV FAITHFUL USE OF THE SCRIPTURES

Before we listen to different texts and motifs from the Holy Scriptures, we wish to give a brief account of the manner in which we will do that. It is good for us, *a priori*, to provide clarity concerning the matter of how we receive, view and handle the Bible.

1. View of Scripture

In 2007 our General Synod decided to appoint a Study Group to prepare an ecclesiastical statement about homosexuality and homosexual relationships. This statement was to be made within the scope of the reformed view of Scripture; hence, we wish to explain something of this view of Scripture in this document. In doing so, we refer to the hermeneutical approach expressed in the report "Woman and Office" adopted by Synod 1998. In connection therewith we wish to highlight the following.

The Reformed View of Scripture is more than just a theoretical perspective. We accept the Scriptures before we develop a perspective on them. The Holy Spirit who has spoken by the prophets and apostles is the same Spirit who still testifies in our hearts that these are the Scriptures of God. Therefore, the reliability and credibility of the Bible do not depend on any argument from our side: Scripture proves itself. Having said this, we do not deny that tension may exist between the Old and New Testament, and between different books of the Bible; however, this is consistent with the multicolored work of the Holy Spirit, who is One, yet has inspired many in many ways. (Cf. Belgic Confession, Article 5.)

This faith principle means that we always want to receive and approach the Bible in obedience. Such obedience does not speak for itself. Again and again we will have to conquer all kinds of resistance, false assumptions and misunderstandings on our part. Life with the Scriptures is a matter of constant repentance and obedience to God. For those who are in Christ, this obedience is a thing of joy and love: "O how love I thy law". At heart, it is obedience to the good news that in Christ, God does not condemn people for their past, but frees them from the guilt and power of sin. He opens a new future to them, with a new life and a new identity. Regardless of gender and of any sexual orientation, in this gospel and this obedience all Christians are one – even though they must daily learn this anew.

The Reformed View of Scripture aims to do full justice to the Bible. That means, among other

things, that it takes into account the times in which the Bible writers lived compared to the time in which we live. The direct application of certain Bible verses to certain current situations is not always appropriate. For example, when the apostle Paul spurs on his readers to greet each other with a holy kiss, he does that in a cultural context that is not ours. Doing the same today would create misunderstandings; therefore, we must take into account the context of a biblical text. Only then can we do justice to it.

However, we may not give so much weight to the cultural aspect that we, in effect set aside the Word that has been given to us. In the remainder of this report, for example, the question is asked with which forms of homosexuality the Apostle Paul may have been familiar and to what extent these are similar to the homosexual acts and feelings that we might encounter today. The Reformed View of Scripture recognizes these aspects and at the same time stresses that the authority of Scripture is decisive authority. It wants to avoid one-sidedness.

A one-sided emphasis on the context in which a Bible text originated, will always encounter differences between then and now. And it is easy to come to the premature conclusion that something other is meant than what we see today. We criticise all too quickly the culture of that time, and the associated Bible text, but are not critical enough of our own culture.

But whoever takes the Bible seriously as the Word of God, will keep in mind that while it has originated in a very specific context, it at the same time addresses all humanity. In other words, Scripture does not allow itself to be reduced to a truth solely for the context of there and then. We fall under its critical eye in our own cultural context. Even if we take into account cultural contexts, we cannot avoid the question of the distinctive authority of the whole of Scripture. The time-honored method of comparing Scripture with Scripture has lasting value.

Furthermore, it is also vital that the Reformed View of Scripture takes into account not only the time in which the Bible originated, but also, especially, the history of the salvation that God gives. He followed a specific way in which He established his salvation and distributes redemption. Sometimes we can observe a development within Scripture. For example, an Old Testament commandment may receive a more pointed explanation in the light of the New Testament. The old word gains a normative sound in a new context. This, alone, proves that the Spirit can enter into a particular context with a word that is not limited to that context. The time bound Word has lasting authority.

2. Some Broad Outlines

Within the framework of this report it is meaningful to provide a few accents to give color to the whole. Especially, we point to the emphasis on the redemptive-historical progress of

creation, fall, and redemption, which also resonates the aspect of the Kingdom of God.

God created man in a certain way, that is good. Through the fall into sin, however, this good changed into its opposite, and it is restored only in the way of salvation by Jesus Christ. We may not understand this classic and tested triad (creation, fall, and redemption) in such a way that we can simply read God's creation purpose from certain ordinances, structures or states of affairs. The order that God has placed in creation does not stand on its own, as if it had been exempted from the effects of sin. Sin has bitten deeply into creation and also into our understanding of God's creation and its purpose.

God's deepest purpose is known and visible in his Son Jesus Christ. Creation, fall and redemption do not consist simply of an historical sequence. All three are focussed in Christ; thus, they stand in relation to the history of salvation: they explain each other. We have access to the goodness of creation only in Jesus Christ. In the crucifixion and death of Christ we see how deeply sin penetrates. In the resurrection of Christ from the dead, God the Father shows that He remains faithful to his creation intent. The order and the purpose of creation are found in the light of the revelation of the triune God.

The above implies that we most deeply learn to understand the brokenness of creation and the depth of our guilt in the light of the cross of Christ. If a Christian suffers under this brokenness, neither brokenness nor guilt has the final word. Even when we, in what follows in this report, speak of what God has given in creation, ultimately it is the crucified and risen One who stands central. Creation and recreation cannot be played off against each other.

We read Scripture as a unity. The proclamation that God is Creator and the proclamation of his glory as Creator continue to resound until the last moment. That testimony throws light on the renewal of all things that God gives in the coming of his Kingdom. We see the nature of salvation in the triad of creation, fall and redemption.

For the Christian, redemption means that he shares in the anointing of Christ. Thus he receives a new identity. That identity, however, exists under the constant tension of the "already" and the "not yet". In Christ, believers share in the new creation, but at the same time they are still on the way to God's future.

The concrete realization of the Christian life is the following of Jesus Christ, who sets His own free, and calls them out of everything that binds them. Thus they are called to the Kingdom of God and Christ. He who follows the crucified One, becomes a cross bearer himself. This, however, is not bad news; ultimately it is good news, it is Gospel. He, who suffers with Christ, will also share in His glory.

The Christian church regularly asks great sacrifices of people, sometimes brought with struggle and sometimes with joy, but always in the spirit of Christ, who went before us in showing what “service” is, and in teaching us that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

In this context the emphasis on the imitation of Christ is also important. While cross bearing is part of this imitation for every believer, ultimately it is good news. Not only is a cross laid upon them, but Christians themselves willingly take it up in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But the believer does not stand alone. He stands in a community. The church is a communion of pilgrims who encourage one another to persevere on this road of imitation. Going that road, although difficult and painful, is ultimately a joy, no matter how often we stumble.

Finally, the emphasis on the imitation of Christ is not so much a matter of complying with the rules the church may impose. After, all by the grace of God believers themselves choose to follow Jesus Christ. Their imitation is, in other words, genuine and authentic. In this, the Bible and the church are not just external authorities but through the working of the Holy Spirit they are also accepted inwardly. This Christian authenticity is therefore essentially and permanently bound to the authority of Jesus Christ. In this imitation of Christ, authenticity and authority are not mutually exclusive; they embrace each other.

V. SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

The questions around the subject of homosexuality and homosexual relationships are complex. There is brokenness in creation. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the good that God has given in sexuality and marriage. We want to honor our Creator who from the beginning has given us such a rich gift.

1. Equality and diversity

In the beginning, God bound man and woman together. He created Adam from the dust of the earth and his wife from one of his ribs (Gen.2:22). The Hebrew word for woman refers to this; it is derived from the Hebrew word for man. (*'isha'* from *'ish'*) God brought this *isha* to her *ish* (Gen. 2:23). In a certain sense they are therefore equal and the same. Both are created and represent their Creator. Together they have a task on earth.

They are also similar in the fact that they both fell into sin and need redemption. Together they are image of God (Gen. 1:27), but also separately (Gen. 9: 6; James 3:9). That equality is a source of joy. It provides recognition.

Next to similarity there is also difference between man and woman. This difference is fundamental. Both are created separately. God wanted their variety (Gen.1: 27). Being man or woman is not only a question of a number of physical characteristics; it is essentially interwoven with their humanity.

This individuality of being man or woman develops from the first beginning of existence and continues at every stage. It is recognizable in the way of thinking and feeling, want and desire, talk and walk, dress and caring, appreciation of truth and beauty, attitude and action in the world and dealing with fellow human beings and human structures. To some extent, these matters also depend on the culture in which people live. However, it is a difference that permeates our very nature. That difference influences our bearing and behaviour in relation to one's own gender as opposed to the other gender. Gender (sex) stamps our individuality. We are always *either* man *or* woman.

2. Focussed on Each Other

Specific to human sexuality as it is created by God, is its orientation to the opposite sex: God created man in his orientation to the woman and the woman in her orientation to the man. One longs for the other. Both make an appeal to the other. This appeal and mutual attraction

call for further encounter. That meeting has as its aim not only the survival of mankind, but also the good life together and living before the face of God.

Moreover, this orientation is a source of joy. God desires that joy. All of Scripture speaks about that, especially the Song of Solomon. Sexuality is a gift from God. It did not begin as some strange power from which people must turn away. Of itself, sexuality is not under the control of demonic powers. In the world around ancient Israel that was different. There, sexuality was strongly connected with the worship of fertility gods. It is clear from the first book of the Bible that sexuality is part of the created reality. Admittedly, Genesis mentions the intimate relationship between husband and wife only explicitly after the Fall: Adam had intercourse with Eve, his wife (Gen. 4: 1). Yet we must not draw the conclusion that such intercourse was related merely to the Fall. Already the first chapter of Genesis speaks about offspring of Adam and his wife (Gen. 1: 28).

God's promise and command with a view to fertility assume intimate relations between husband and wife. Creation is good and hence also this intimacy. Husband and wife may accept this intimacy and the associated gift of fertility with gratitude and joy. This is also confirmed in the statement that they will be one flesh. Although these gifts of sexuality and fertility were severely affected by the fall, (cf. Gen. 3:16), they are still preserved. They belong to human existence. In the history of salvation this is confirmed in a special way. In the redemption of mankind from the power of sin, God has deployed this intercourse between husband and wife. The Old Testament outlines the way which eventually leads to the coming of the Messiah: it is through the union of husband and wife and the blessing of children.

Man may not usurp this relationship between husband and wife for his own ends. God asks accountability for the use of what He has given, also the gift of sexual activity. It bears the stamp of being the image-of-God. That has not changed after the Fall. Sexuality is not an instinct or a passion, but a gift to people who can love, respect and show loyalty to each other.

Present-day western culture alienates itself more and more from these notions. It places all emphasis on the experience of the pleasure and enjoyment of sexual activity itself, in any form whatsoever. It takes no account of God. The beauty and vitality of the body have become everything. Enjoyment and happiness in one's own lives determine the current thinking about sexuality. This is not the enjoyment and happiness of which the Gospel speaks and which is the ultimate destination of being human.

3. The Coming Generation

From the beginning, however, men and women were not oriented just to each other, but together also on the next generation. This orientation is intended to preserve the human race. Ultimately, this preservation is directed to the task of the human race in this world. This facet of

sexuality has been given great emphasis, especially in the Old Testament in which this particular aspect largely determined the position of the woman. This position is primarily her role as a mother. Illustrative of this is the name of the first woman, "mother" (Gen. 3:20). In addition, it is important to note that Genesis mentions the focus on a coming generation and the creation of man in God's image in one breath (Gen. 1: 27,28).

In the beginning of our era, in the time of Jesus and the apostles, people perceived this function of sexuality in relation to the blessing of receiving children as a matter of great value. In some cultures of that time, however, there was a school of thought that considered sexuality in itself as part of a sinful world. In some circles this was an exceptionally strong idea; some cultures favored ascetic tendencies which turn away from the earthly existence and sexuality as such. Augustine (354-413) was an exponent of this tendency from a slightly later time. According to him, the experience of sexuality is subordinate to the begetting of offspring. That thought has long been reflected in the history of the Church.

This is not consistent with the testimony of Scripture. (cf. 1 Tim 4: 4-5.) The body is not at a lower level than the soul. The production of children is not the only function of sexuality. This is already made clear in the Old Testament. It reveals a development towards monogamy and more extensive regulation of marriage. It expressly forbids sexual intercourse outside of marriage, in so doing enhancing the position of womanhood. Her role in marriage gains in importance. She is not merely a mother, and the means by which a man may acquire posterity. Greater stress is placed on the personal aspect of their relationship and mutual love.

4. Mutual Complementarity

As previously stated, man and woman, in their original state, are oriented towards one another. This orientation has its own character. It is not merely a human orientation of two human beings toward each other, but also of persons who are fundamentally different. They can complement each other in a fundamental manner.

That complementarity is unique. When Adam was alone, he was, in the judgment God, not complete. Were he to continue alone, there would be something missing. That would not be good. He needed a helper beside him: someone who would rescue him from his loneliness. His Creator would take care of this (Gen. 2:18). It is peculiar to man that he longs for a life partner with whom he can share his existence on earth.

In what follows, Genesis relates that God created the animal world; however, Adam cannot find a suitable companion in it (Gen. 2:20). Then God does give him someone who can be a companion. (Gen. 2:25). This companion is not created in isolation, but in relation to Adam. She

is built from his rib. Together they form a cohesive unity. That unity aims for their complementarity. The word, “therefore” points this out: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother” (Gen.2: 24). Precisely because of the fact that the man in himself is not complete, he will leave his parents and be joined to his wife. Together they will be one flesh. In this way they stand next to each other, beneath their Creator, above the earth (cf. Gen. 1: 28).

This complementarity of husband and wife covers three areas. In the first place, they complement each other in their common task in the world. Together they give shape to their stewardship mission. Both have received their assignment. United, they must perform their tasks. (Gen.1:27-28). Just as the wife stands beside her husband physically and psychologically, so the husband stands next to his wife. This difference does not impoverish but enrich them. The weakness of the one finds support in the other; what the one lacks, the other supplies. With their gifts they may serve one another. Together they form a community of life, supported by mutual aid. This has its orientation in the help which God gives his people.

Second, husband and wife may be allies and companions. Not only do they have a common task, but they may also draw comfort and strength from being together. Together they go into the future. They support and help, encourage and comfort each other. This applies to matters relating to temporal and earthly existence, but also to their relationship with their Creator and King.

Third, this complementarity concerns the family. Family formation is made possible due to the fundamental difference in structure and being of man and woman. Immediately following the statement in Genesis that man is created masculine and feminine, there follows the promise that the human race will multiply and populate the earth (Gen. 1:28). Associated with this is their complementarity in raising and guiding their children. Children grow up under two parents who complement each other. Children can mirror themselves in two parents, who are fundamentally different from each other. The fact that a child is born of husband and wife, is not without significance for the maturation process that leads children to adulthood.

This mutual complementarity is a first step towards broader partnerships in which people live together. The bond between husband and wife extends naturally to the nuclear family and to the extended family and then to even broader relationships. In particular the Old Testament highlights this formation of societal ties. Sexuality is a primary driver for the structures of human society.

5. Marriage Covenant

This mutual complementarity and bond between husband and wife takes shape especially in the marriage covenant that they make for life, and in which all aspects of their personhood are involved. In this connectedness God shows us something of the Covenant relationship He entered into with man at his creation.

In addition, the Christian congregation may also know that the marriage of believers is a reflection of the relationship between Christ and his Church. Paul specifically points this out (Eph. 5: 32). The Apostle thus emphasizes the great value of marriage. For a Christian the marital connection is a connection that goes back not only to the creation of male and female, but also to what God intended for the relationship between Christ and his Church. The Apostle states that God already had this relationship in view at the time of creation. Every believer should think of this in his married state. He will then live his life in such a way that it will mirror the relationship between Christ and His church. (Eph. 5: 22-30). cf. Deuteronomy 33:29; Ex. 18:4; Ps. 33:20; 121:1-2; 146:5.

Given its origin and character, the marriage bond is a commitment for life. Husband and wife, in the fullness of their person, are connected to each other. This is the intent of the biblical author when he speaks of the encounter of the first man with his “Wo-man”. Adam calls his wife his own flesh and blood: bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh (Gen. 2: 23). By analogy, Eve may refer to her husband as her flesh and blood. They both form a unity in relation to the rest of creation. This unity is stronger than the unity with parents. The man leaves his father and mother and unites himself to his wife with whom he forms an intimate connection for life (Gen. 2:24). Their lifestyle forms part of that intimate life connection. They conclude a covenant for life.

This connection takes place before the face of God. Characteristic of a marriage covenant is that the promise is made before a third party. Those who marry in Christ do so before Christ himself and his congregation. The making of a promise before a third party serves to protect the marriage. This promise also protects, among other things, the gift of sexuality. The fact that immediately after the Fall man experiences shame indicates that this protection is needed. Shame refers to something that can under no circumstances be shared with another and belongs to the individuality of the person. This individuality is vulnerable. It needs protection against unauthorized intrusion. The gift of sexuality finds protection in marriage and in the promise that goes with it.

In addition, this connection provides the possibility for husband and wife jointly to perform their task. Not only are they separately the image of God, but also jointly. The husband is the helper who assists his wife, and the wife is the helper who assists her husband. (Gen. 2:18).

They are companions for life in love and faithfulness. In this they may experience peace and joy. The gift of family formation also fits in the joint task they have. When husband and wife receive this gift they may also in this way serve society and the future generation.

Intimate sexual relations have their rightful place within this alliance. This particular unification refers to the exclusive bond in which husband and wife are joined together. That bond excludes any third party. This distinguishes the bond of marriage from friendship, which does leave room for a third party. Furthermore, the union between husband and wife speaks of complementarity and joy in each other, feelings of loyalty and happiness, safety and security, and the desire for mutual enrichment. This sexual relationship speaks of the special gift of God to husband and wife: physical fertility. Everything which is structurally necessary for receiving children is present in that encounter. Husband and wife may contribute to ensure that the task of humanity in God's creation will continue.

6. Ultimate connection

God has created man and woman with a desire for each other, a desire to be complemented and complete. However, this desire does not stand alone. It refers to a deeper desire; it calls for the fulfillment of the highest happiness. That happiness exists in the bond between man and his Creator: it is to walk with God. The final fulfillment of human desire therefore lies in the meeting with God and the sharing in his Kingdom.

That is not to say that only the person who has received a permanent life partner is fully human and has reached his destination. All kinds of non-marital forms of friendship can, albeit only partially, meet the deep human longing for completion and fulfillment of the human condition. This is already hinted at in the word that says: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen.1:18a). However, higher than the relationship between people is their relationship with their Creator. Man is incomplete in himself until he finds the perfect fulfillment of his existence in his Creator. Jesus is the perfect image of God. Even though during his earthly life he was not bound to a wife and he did not need that connection, yet He was man as God intended. He was man, having reached his goal. His perfection lay in his bond with his heavenly Father.

Christ promises the same perfection to his followers. Ultimately, they find the realization of their destiny only in God and his Kingdom. Their primary bond lies in the household of God. Therefore, the completion of being man or woman is not primarily in a marriage relationship, but in the union with Christ and the relationship with God which He has restored. In this way the New Testament explicitly relativizes sexuality and marriage. They stand in the light of the Kingdom of God.

Sexuality and marriage belong to the penultimate matters. In this connection there is the New Testament statement about the choice not to marry. That testimony attaches greater weight to the single state than does the Old Testament. In light of the Kingdom of God, married and unmarried are together like two equivalent alternatives. The married state points back to the creative work of God; the single points ahead to the future complete fulfillment of God's promises. Regrettably, the Christian congregation does not always sufficiently value the single state. Too often in our culture, the unmarried or the ones without a relationship are considered deserving of pity. This is not consistent with what Jesus taught and what was put forward by Paul. Jesus and Paul stressed the very high value of the single state within the Kingdom of God.

At various times Jesus spoke about being unmarried. On one of these occasions He says that some men do not marry because from their birth they are not able to do so. Other men are so shaped by people that their condition makes marriage impossible. Still others, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, have made themselves so that they cannot come to this (Matt. 19: 12). Voluntarily they have taken this cross to continue to serve the Kingdom of God. In this context, it is particularly the first category that is of interest: some men do not marry because from birth they are unable to do so. These words show that Jesus has an eye for these people who were born in such a condition that they cannot enter into marriage. Being unmarried can be the result of what was or was not given at birth. However, the emphasis in this word of Jesus is on the third category: those who voluntarily take on the cross of singlehood for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

The presupposition of both the Old and the New Testament is that being single leaves no room for sexual relations outside of marriage. Sexuality is legitimate only within the context of marriage. At the same time, sexuality is relativized. The deepest human longing can only be provisionally fulfilled in the interpersonal sphere, in the relationship between husband and wife. That desire will find complete fulfillment in the encounter between man and his Creator.

7. Recalcitrant Reality

Sexuality and marriage are gifts from God and a source of joy. They enrich humanity and human coexistence. Also this aspect of creation provides every reason for praise to our Creator. In addition, the single state has its own value. The New Testament shows that it is a viable alternative in Christ.

However, our culture will not adopt this song praise of marriage and sexuality, at least not as a hymn to the Creator. Nor will they accept the value of the single state as outlined here. Among those also who do see marriage and sexuality as gifts from God, some will be critical of what has been stated above. One point of criticism will be that the reality is recalcitrant: in this

reality, sexual life is often distorted and twisted. Not everyone has a desire as God had originally intended. Another point of criticism of this position might be that it does not take into account the experience of love and faithfulness in a same-sex relationship: in that respect, is homosexuality not equivalent to heterosexuality? In the next chapter we will see what Scripture says about that.

VI DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURAL GIVENS

Scripture is decisive for us. It is the rule of faith. Our faith is founded in them and confirmed by them. The Bible is therefore also of decisive importance for our view of sexuality. At the same time, this raises a problem. In vain we look in Scripture for the terms “homosexual” and “homosexual relationships”. The Bible texts often referenced in this discussion seem to, at first, refer only to certain behaviours.

These texts are discussed in this chapter. We start at the beginning: Creation and Fall. Then follows a specific Scripture passage that is central in the consideration of homosexuality (Rom. 1) and two other texts of the New Testament epistles (1Cor. 6: 9,10 and 1 Tim. 1:9,10). Following that we will look at the book of Leviticus. At the end of this chapter we will consider two Bible passages in which violent sexual behavior is depicted in the accounts of violence in Sodom and Gibeah. In view of the character of these narratives we could have passed them by; still, we will not do that, since they often surface in these discussions.

1. Creation and Fall

God created heaven and earth and also human sexuality. Various things have been said about this in the preceding chapter. Particular emphasis was placed on the truth that sexuality and marriage are good and precious gifts of God. These gifts are fundamentally affected by sin. All mankind experiences the consequences of this.

One of the signs of brokenness is evident in the area of sexuality: some people are structurally more attracted to their own sex than the other. This attraction signifies the brokenness of the world in which we live. Many experience this. They feel that they are different. That feeling can be a source of sadness, anxiety, uncertainty and inner conflicts. Guilt feelings may also enter into this. One who has had a homosexual orientation from childhood may feel inferior.

An increased sign of that brokenness is the compaction of such feelings into a homosexual orientation. We need to add that such an orientation should still be distinguished from an active interaction between people of the same sex. If one has a same-sex orientation, he does not, as such, have to choose for a corresponding action. Moreover, homosexual intercourse does not necessarily have to proceed from a homosexual preference.

In this chapter, the question is faced as to what the Bible says about homosexual behavior and possibly also a corresponding orientation. This is what we are trying to discover in this chapter. Already now we can say something about it.

The first is that all people are fundamentally equal. All share in the brokenness of existence. As such, no one is less or worse than another because of orientation. No one needs to think that due to the brokenness in his life he is any the less valuable to God. At the same time, the other must also be said: no one should elevate himself over another merely on the basis of sexual orientation.

The second is that God wants to meet every human being and has already done so in Christ Jesus. This will be worked out in the next chapter. Then we want to look at the whole of the message of the Bible.

2. The Epistle to the Romans

In the discussion on homosexuality and homosexual relationships the letter of Paul to the Romans has an important place.

2.1. World without God

In this letter Paul pronounces a sharp judgment on a humanity that venerates the creature above its Creator. People are profoundly unjust and wicked, greedy and evil. The apostle enumerates more than twenty sins of which they are guilty (1:29-31). In this context, he also mentions the fact that the natural relations between man and woman are exchanged for the unnatural.

This judgment does not stand in isolation. The Apostle wants to make it clear that fundamentally non-Jews and Jews form a unity. They can be saved in no way other than by justification by faith. In this letter, among other things, Paul wants to reduce tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians.

For this purpose, at the beginning of his letter, the apostle depicts human guilt and sin (1:18-32). He mentions things which elicit no discussion among his readers and which are consistent with the overall assessment of Jewish-Hellenistic circles. Jewish Christians were familiar with these matters. Christians from other nations must therefore also have been aware of them. Probably many of them felt strongly attracted to Judaism before their adoption of the Christian faith. With that they had also accepted the judgement within Judaism on a world turning away from God.

Paul writes that God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (1: 18). This violation of the truth appears in idolatry and a whole range of sins (1: 29-31). In particular, he draws attention to intercourse between people of the same sex.

Now, the apostle is not saying that such sins are worse than the other things that are listed in the conclusion of this section of his letter. But, by placing this sin as an exemplary first, he wants to make it clear from what origin the evil practices that he cited have sprung. That basis is that mankind worships the creature instead of the Creator. For that reason, all of his understanding has been darkened. That is the connection between the example that has been given priority by the apostle and the other sins that are mentioned.

Because of the refusal of people to give God the place that is rightfully His, “God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting” (1: 28). In depicting this situation, the apostle used words well known in the Jewish–Hellenistic circles of his days: uncleanness and shame (1:24 and 27). (shame, turpitude, immorality, wickedness, depravity, baseness, improbity) “What is shameful” (immorality, etc.) is clearly related to sin (see Rev. 16: 15) and is frequently used in the Greek translation of Leviticus (18: 6-19; 20:11 and 17-21). Also the word for uncleanness (Rom. 1:24) appears in that same translation (Lev. 18: 19; 20, 21 and 25). In other places Paul used the word “uncleanness” in connection with lawlessness (Rom. 6: 19) or “fornication and debauchery” (2 Cor. 12:21). The apostle declares that God has not called his own to uncleanness, but to holiness (1 Thess. 4: 7).

The cause of this violation of the truth lies in man himself. He has no excuse for this evil. (Rom. 1, 20). He is responsible for that. God’s wrath is not against some ignorant humanity. From the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen in His works, His eternal power and divinity are discernible to the understanding (1:20). But the human race which God knew (1: 21) consciously changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four footed animals and creeping things (1:23) exchanging the truth for a lie (1:25). The worship of the Creator was replaced by idol worship.

In the closing words of this chapter Paul underscores this conscious choice: although people know the judgment of God and know that those who do such things deserve death, they still forge ahead and do them. Worse yet, they approve of others who do those things (1:32). God has surrendered them to the consequences of their idolatrous choice (see 1: 18a): uncleanness (1: 24), vile passions (1, 26) and a debased mind (1:28), flowing to a range of sins (1, 29-31). With this God has not surrendered man to a power foreign to himself but to his own desires. Paul does not set apart a section of mankind, namely, the actively homosexual part, to condemn it separately. He sees a larger picture. He condemns the whole of humanity and the entire sinful pattern of all of human society after the fall. That society is one body. That entire body falls under the judgment of God. Even though this judgement manifests itself in specific areas of life, the entire fallen world displays confusion. It has totally lost sight of what serves humanity. That which counters their well-being is called good; that which serves their well-being is called evil. This reversal, which began with idolatry, progresses with immorality and dishonouring of the

human body.

The judgment of God upon his fallen humanity is that He lets it proceed on this self-chosen road. And thus it fulfills the measure of its iniquity. People who believe that recognizing the Creator is beneath their dignity will experience that the dignity of their body is compromised. Where the wrath of God rules, human interaction derails: this interaction with each other is then no longer governed by the order instituted by God but is twisted into what Paul calls "unnatural" intercourse", says J.P. Versteeg. This unnatural intercourse is a symptom of the disease of all mankind to which all stand guilty. In this context, Paul uses the term "wages": for its service of idols, mankind receives a wage which, among other things, is the practice of homosexuality. Again, the Apostle does not focus on a specific group of society to distinguish it. He does not speak about individuals who would be guiltier than others. All of creation shares in the brokenness caused by sin.

Further, people experience "in themselves" the by-products of their wrong actions. The practice of fighting with God's order for human life does not remain without consequences. An example of this is that the body is dishonored. Twice Paul mentions this "themselves". The first time it is related to "uncleanness" (1:24), and the second time in connection with "shameful" (1:27). Thus he indicates that people have forfeited their honor and dignity.

The words "uncleanness" and "shameful" are parallel. In both cases, these are people who have exchanged the truth of God for a lie. Paul reminds us of this in a parenthetical statement: those who serve idols deny the truth of God (1:25). That is why they act as they do. God has delivered them over to their decadent desires (1:6) from which they experience the consequences "in themselves".

As with people who engage in same-sex relations, other practices prove that people who have left God demonstrate actions which are not fitting (*ta mèkathèkonta*) (1:29-31). These too are serious matters. But Paul goes deeper into the matter of sexual intercourse between people of the same sex. He specifically mentions this relationship because he wants to give a clear example in which the depravity of the pagan world expresses itself.

2.2 Types of homosexual activity

There is some difference of opinion about the nature of the homosexual acts to which Paul is referring. We need to get some clarity about this first.

a. Temple prostitution

Some believe that Paul condemns not each homosexual act but only homosexual temple prostitution. The Apostle speaks about idolatry. To idolatry belong idolatrous temples. In ancient times such temples were not infrequently the place where "holy women" and "holy

men” performed sexual acts. Still, it is very unlikely that Paul was thinking primarily of temple prostitution. He speaks in general terms about homosexual behavior. In addition, he also mentions sexual intercourse between women, a phenomenon that did not occur in temple prostitution and was sharply rejected in the society of its day.

In his letter, Paul depicts the entire fallen human race. That is not just the “pagan” world with its temples. Also the people of Israel had made themselves guilty of exchanging God for an idol. It is striking that the Apostle does not mention the word “pagan” in this chapter. He speaks in general about “people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (1:18b). Thus he anticipates what a few moments later he highlights in this letter. In the first chapter Paul judges the world, but from the second chapter he specifically mentions the Jews. They are also subject to that judgment. Idolatry manifests itself in the way of life of the entire current world.

b. Pederasty

Others believe that Paul limits himself to the rejection of pederasty - a sexual relationship between an adult male and a boy. However, the context was unlike the classical period of ancient Greece. In Rome pederasty was not so much sexual dealings with a boy within the framework of education and initiation, but primarily the sexual relationship of a slave owner with slave boys. Power played a greater role in it than in ancient Greece. With his reference to pederasty Paul is supposed to have wanted to indicate how bad people can be. That, however, is not a correct explanation of the words of the apostle.

If this is the right explanation, it would not be clear why Paul writes about sexual intercourse between women. He also writes that they have replaced the natural interaction by an unnatural (1:26). That behaviour has no connection with pederasty. The Apostle also says that men fornicate with men. This manner of speaking strongly indicates a reciprocal relationship. This reciprocity is not present in a pederast relationship and certainly not in a Roman setting in which sex with boy slaves had a strong physical and “masculine” character. It is therefore not plausible that Paul would have thought only of pederasty.

c. Decadent behavior

Another thought is that Paul is merely referring to homosexual prostitution, debauchery and other forms of decadent behavior. The words the Apostle uses would indicate this: “passion, lust and desire”, in the Greek text (1: 24, 26 and 27), respectively ‘*epithumia*’, ‘*pathos*’ and ‘*orexis*’. However, this idea is not correct. In the society and the Jewish-Hellenistic tradition from which Paul came, these words were not limited to describe what we would call “debauchery” today. They are used with a view to any sexual act that is incompatible with being male or female, and all that goes with that. That is why, according to the word usage of those days, the terms “passion”, “lust” and “desire” were also applicable to a homosexual act between two adult free citizens of the same sex. These words mean everything that is sexually “against

nature”.

The word “passion”(epithumia) is more common in Paul’s letters. For instance, the apostle writes that, “We cannot obey the epithumiai of sin”. Although many do just that, this behavior is not always what we mean by debauchery. That “passion” does lead to a life that is not in accordance with nature. The word epithumia talks about any improper desire.

The same thing applies to the concept of “lust” (pathos). Led by his pathos, a person is not guided by what is fitting. He does not do what is part of his nature. “Lust” does not speak of what we find abhorrent in our days, but of an act that deviates from what the norms of that time considered natural.

In the same vein, “desire” (praxis) is a notion that is reinforced by the addition that men are burning for each other. That word usage is rare in the New Testament. It is suggestive of an act in which every human standard is missing. But again, we must be careful that we do not fill these words from our western background. In Paul’s day, these words had not only the sound of what we mean by debauchery; they were generally applied to every sexual relationship which is "against nature".

This is true also for sexual intercourse between two women. That intercourse also is “against nature” and falls under the judgment of lust (orexis). Paul draws a direct line between sexual intercourse between women and intercourse between men. He does that at the beginning of verse 27. The connecting word is “likewise”. As women have abandoned natural relations and therefore have followed their “lust”, men have also abandoned natural relations and were inflamed with “lust” for one another. The word orexis (lust) is no different than epithumia (passion) and pathos (lust) and as such refers to no more licentious acts than those designated as an act "against nature ".

Here, it is not so much the measure and intensity of the homosexual act that is important, but its nature.

d. No distinction

In Paul’s days there were various forms of homosexual activity. We already mentioned pederasty. In addition, male prostitutes, called *cinaedi*, offered their bodies. A *cinaedus* was always the subordinate party. Homosexual behavior also took place in imperial and other higher circles. These circles considered themselves to be above the normal bourgeois morality. Cf. Rom. 7: 7-8, 13, 14; Gal.5: 16, 24; Col. 3: 5. Homosexual activity, let alone a relationship, between equal, free citizens was not accepted in normal civilian life. Such a situation was inappropriate and possibly even forbidden by law. This attitude was related to the prevailing view of manhood. A man does not commit acts that are unworthy of him. That is the case with sexual intercourse between two adult freemen. One of them must then play the female role. He who has fulfilled this role has lost his masculine dignity. Romans put great stock in this ideal of masculinity.

However, what was normal and generally expected in civilian life was not always observed. Beneath the surface and sometimes even in public, improper acts took place. It is likely that some literature of the time hinted at relationships between two adult citizens. It is not certain whether such relations actually occurred. Nevertheless, some Roman emperors did enter into a same-sex “marriage”. It is probable that Nero was the first. But then, the emperor was a god, not a man.

Paul does not distinguish between types of homosexual acts. All of them fall under one and the same judgment. In this rejection the apostle is not alone. Some pagan authors of his day also turned against such acts. Some of these writers left some room for same-sex intercourse with slaves, but none for homosexual intercourse between adult free citizens.

2.3 familiarity with orientation

Paul does not write explicitly about homosexual orientation. The fact that he is silent about this does not mean that he was ignorant of it. Ancient Greece was certainly familiar with the phenomenon of a deep homosexual orientation. That is well documented. This also applies to the time of the great Roman Empire. On the basis of existing data, it is possible or even likely that the apostle knew that a homosexual orientation can be closely intertwined with personhood. Still, he makes no explicit comment on this. It may indicate that he did not think that point to be important and saw no essential distinction between a homosexual act outside a reciprocal relationship and such an act – arising from a deep inner orientation – within such a relationship.

Paul describes how humanity has turned away from God. But this aversion to God is not just a matter of outward behavior. It touches the whole human being, even his inner tendencies. The possible interrelationship of a homosexual orientation with one’s personhood underlines the point that Paul wants to make early in his letter to the Romans: this intertwining belongs essentially to the brokenness of a fallen world. It touches the depth of the human condition. It also extends across the entire breadth of mankind. Without exception, each human being is guilty of this brokenness.

We may assume that in this culture, too, there were people with homosexual feelings or a corresponding orientation. And yet, God gave the apostle no concrete instructions on how to deal with this. He did not point out to him the possibility of a deep sexual orientation in the human condition, and that thus this should be handled differently within the Christian church. Nevertheless, even though Paul makes no explicit distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual acts, we cannot therefore conclude that he has nothing to say to us on this point.

2.4 Against nature

The words “passion”, “lust” and “desire” indicate a sexual act "against nature ". Paul writes that women have replaced a relationship of the “natural use for what is against nature”, and men have done the same (Romans 1: 26-27). The words “nature” and “natural” in this context ask for attention.

In Paul’s day “nature” was a general term. Everyone was entitled to his own interpretation of it. It could be used in a very superficial sense of course: whatever is normal; whatever can be expected according to the prevailing customs and habits. But the word could also have a deeper meaning. Then it is about the order in the world. Everything has its own place and purpose. A creature living according to its nature, does what suits its own species and focuses on its purpose. That is the meaning underlined in the Stoic philosophy. The word “nature” is also sometimes associated with the possibility of producing the following generations, and the hierarchical order between the two sexes, male and female. In the latter case, that situation in which a free male citizen adopts a female role and the female a male role is unnatural. The same diversity plays out in Hellenistic Judaism of those days. In Philo 47 we see an example of the various uses of the term “nature”.

Paul’s readers had their own idea of the concept "nature." Possibly they may have filled it from their own Judeo- Hellenistic tradition or from a Stoic background. It is not exactly clear which background Paul wishes to evoke within the word. He does use it in other letters. Sometimes it carries a very superficial meaning. Such is the case when he says that nature teaches how men and women should wear their hair (1 Cor. 11: 14-15). In Romans 1, he uses the word “nature” to condemn homosexual acts. He applies terminology familiar to his time. But, in this context, this terminology takes on a specific meaning. It is determined by the context. The context makes a reference to creation. In his creation God has revealed his eternal power and divinity (Rom. 1: 19-20) and gave to each creature its own nature and purpose, also to man and his sexuality.

What Paul writes is strongly reminiscent of Genesis. He points out that people have exchanged the majesty of the incorruptible God for images of corruptible man, and birds, and four- footed beasts and creeping things (1: 23). That reminds us of words from the first book of the Bible: God created man in his image and gave him dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and everything that crawls upon it. (Gen.1: 26). Furthermore, Paul uses the adjectives ‘*arsen*’ and ‘*thelus*’ (Rom.1: 26-27) instead of nouns ‘*Aner*’ (man) and ‘*Gune*’ (woman). *Arsen* (male) and *thelus* (female) specifically indicate the marital relationship. Here Paul follows the speech pattern of Genesis (1: 27).

“Unnatural intercourse” therefore specifies a relationship that goes against the intention of the Creator. This relationship does not do justice to the established order that man and woman are meant to be together. In this connection, the use of the word “nature” underlines what is already certain from God’s revelation concerning his creation. God’s speech permeates the created reality. His speech is also audible in the natural interaction between man and wife.

It is therefore also clear that Paul is not referring to the actual orientation of an individual. The thought that this is what he has in mind is quite common in our time. If that were the case, the apostle could then be speaking of people with a heterosexual “nature” or “disposition” who engage in homosexual conduct. To do so would then be acting contrary to their actual nature. Those who hold to this explanation then extend their reasoning: someone with homosexual feelings goes against his own "nature" when he engages in heterosexual conduct. On the other hand, Paul's objection would not apply to a person with homosexual feelings engaging in homosexual relations. For then he would be answering to his own nature.

This explanation, as already stated, is incorrect. Besides, it should be noted that Paul does not write that men have changed “their” nature but have acted against “*the*” nature. This nature is not the actual nature of individuals, but nature as created by God.

3. Two admonitions

Apart from the above texts there are two other sections in the New Testament that refer to homosexual activity (1 Cor. 6: 9-10; 1 Tim 1, 9-10). In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of those who persist in a life apart from God. Those who do not want to break with sin have no part in the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6: 9-10). This involves, among others, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

The word *malakos* (plural: *malakoi*) has no precise delineation. Literally it means: those who are soft. It refers to men who act in an effeminate manner and immerse themselves in weakness (*malakia*), in a life of pleasure and lack of self-control. However, Paul uses this word after adulterers and before *arsenokoitai*, men who lie with other men. This indicates that it (*malakoi*) is a sexually charged word. It is especially the combination with *arsenokoitai* which indicates that *malakoi* is a homosexually charged word. It refers to men or boys who in same-sex intercourse play the passive female role.

The view of Scroggs that Paul is speaking of a separate category of boys, “call-boys”, is

controversial. The text itself provides no ground for this. It is clear that they cleave to a sinful life style. This cleaving to a sinful way of life is a blockade to entering into the Kingdom of God.

The word *arsenokoitès* (plural: *arsenokoitai*) is not known from other sources predating Paul. In that respect, it is a special word. The apostle uses it not only in the letter to Corinth, but also in his first letter to Timothy (1: 9). It is part of a summation and follows directly after *pornoi*. The text speaks about people who in their lifestyle go against God. His law declares them guilty (1: 8-9).

The word *arsenokoitès*, which Paul uses in these two places, recalls the Law of holiness of Leviticus and is a combination of words from the Greek translation of the Bible (18: 22, 20, 13). The one word indicates "lying down" or "bed" (*koité*), which in Jewish tradition is a euphemism for ejaculation, and the other word is "man" (or *arsen*). The term *arsenokoitès* indicates a man who has sexual intercourse with another man.

This term refers not only to pederasts. It is a word that goes back to Leviticus. It does not primarily indicate a relationship between a man and a boy or situation of abuse. This word must be read in light of Paul's letter to the Romans. What the apostle writes there is a detailed explanation of the concept *arsenokoitès*: men who fornicate with men (*arsenes* and *arsesin*) (Rom. 1: 27). The apostle also speaks of a penalty for both parties. That does not reflect exploitation of one by another, but of a consensual choice. The apostle speaks of homosexual intercourse by men who have consciously made this their life pattern and do not ask for the will of God.

At the same time the gospel message remains that those who turn to Christ Jesus shall receive remission of sins and access to his eternal kingdom. That is what some in the Corinthian church have experienced. Previously, they had been captive to the power of sin, but are sanctified and justified (1Cor. 6: 11). Each one who in Christ is freed from the law of sin and death may by grace live under a new dominion.

4. Provisions from Leviticus

The above passages from the New Testament go back to the book of Leviticus. Here we find an explicit prohibition of sexual intercourse between men. That prohibition is expressed in two very similar provisions. The rules state that a man can have no intercourse with another man as with a woman. Such intercourse is an "abomination" (to'ebah, 18: 22, 20, 13).

The second provision adds that both parties are guilty and deserve the death penalty. The

reason for this severe punishment is the "defilement" of the land: it jeopardizes the future of the people in the Promised Land. This penalty also applies to other matters mentioned in the relevant chapters: sexual acts between members of the same family, adultery, child sacrifice and bestiality. Leviticus also mentions invoking spirits, and the prohibition of sexual intercourse with a woman who is unclean because of her menstruation.

Within the body of the sins listed in the law of holiness, sex between men takes a special place. Leviticus applies the term "abomination" to a range of sins without further specifying them. On a number of occasions this summary format is used. (18: 26-27 and 29-30). It is a collective term for a number of offenses against the commandment of God. It is notable that in the previous section, where the concrete prohibitions were named one by one, the term "abomination" is used only once. This is done in connection with sexual intercourse between men.

The concluding words of this chapter declare that all sins listed in it are, in accordance with its summary, "abominations", but only one of them receives this designation separately. This is not to say that this prohibition would apply today, but according Leviticus violation of this prohibition is a serious matter. We note the same in Chapter 20. There also the word "abomination" is directly related only to sexual intercourse between men.

The question is how much weight these two provisions carry within the whole of Scripture. It is important that they occur in the so-called law of holiness. This law contains not only commandments specifically intended as cultic prescriptions for Israel, but also have a wider application.

It is certain that the prohibition of sexual acts between men has a cultic element. It forbids a practice that occurs among the Canaanites and other peoples. There were the activities of the so-called "holy men". God forbids all idolatrous practices and thus also the practice of so-called holy men who place themselves in the service of some god to surrender themselves to a visitor to the "sanctuary".

Nevertheless, the scope of these prohibitions is not confined to the cultic sphere. The prohibition in Leviticus 20 does not follow directly on a text about idolatry and the sacrifice of children to an idol. It appears in the context of prohibitions relating to adultery, incest and bestiality, matters not directly connected to an idolatrous cult. (20: 10-12 and 14-16). That such a prohibition is not unusual in the ancient oriental world is evident from Middle Assyrian laws in which there is a prohibition on homosexual activity that is not explicitly focused on the cult. Apparently, such a general prohibition contained in these texts from the period around 1076 BC was found to be necessary. It was a formal confirmation of what lived in the culture. This culture did not accept voluntary homosexual relationships between two free citizens. The

legislation mentioned proclaims an express prohibition. Just as these laws prohibit homosexual acts in general, Leviticus also decrees a prohibition.

Moreover, we ought to consider the following: had the prohibitions in Leviticus only been directed against a particular idolatrous cult, the mention of the so-called "holy men" would have been expected. These men, however, are not mentioned. While we cannot draw binding conclusions from this omission, we may take it into account as we weigh these texts as a whole. Even apart from this, it is evident that we may not limit Leviticus to the prohibition of homosexual acts within the cultic sphere. Paul does not do that either, when in his letter to the Romans he closely follows Leviticus. The prohibition covers the entire manner of life of the people of the covenant.

To clarify the possible background of this prohibition, we should consider the following issues. The prohibition protects the boundaries that God has given to His people. The word "abomination" alludes to this. It points to a practice in which people transgress established boundaries and bring together things that do not fit together. This motif also occurs elsewhere in the law of holiness. Intercourse between a woman and an animal, for example, is "a perversion" (Lev.18:23). Intercourse between a man and his daughter-in-law (Lev. 20:12) is such a mixture, a designation which, incidentally, is not reflected in every translation. Other examples of mixing are the mating of cattle with animals from another species, sowing the field with different crops, wearing of clothes woven of two kinds of yarn (Lev.19: 19; cf. Deut. 22: 9-11). Thus, same-sex intercourse brings together what is not appropriate. The man who assumes, or is forced to assume, the role of the woman, transgresses the boundary of masculinity. As well, according to this commandment, the man who appears to play the dominant role loses his honor.

Further, the prohibition protects the continued existence of the covenant people. Together with other commandments, God has given it so that his people could continue to exist among other nations. The foundations of human society must remain intact, in particular the foundation of marriage and family. Sexuality has its appropriate place within the given frameworks.

In addition, the prohibition underlines the unique position of the covenant people compared to other peoples. The people are holy because God is holy (Lev. 19:2). Israel must keep far away from the Egyptians, Canaanites and other peoples that serve idols and follow lifestyles to match. (18: 1-4, 24-28). The holiness of God should be reflected throughout Israel's society and life style. While sex between men was forbidden, it did sometimes occur in the cultic practices of pagan societies. So-called "holy men" were active in this. Israel must distinguish itself from this.

Finally, this commandment goes to a deeper level than that of cultic practice and historical context. It goes back to God's creation intent. Sexual intercourse between men transgresses a limit given with creation.

5. The Crime of Sodom

The history of the crime of Sodom speaks of two angels who visit the city. Lot receives them hospitably (Gen.19), but the population wants to assert its power. In the eyes of the entire population these guests are enemies. That is why they want to rape them. Rape is a weapon whereby a victor deprives his opponent of every last shred of dignity. Hardly anything worse can happen to the vanquished. The honor of a man represents his humanity: when honor is lost, all is lost. In an extreme attempt to prevent this terrible attack Lot offers his two daughters. The offer is rejected. The men of the city want to take the foreigners and will not have Lot prescribe the law to them.

The judgment of God is harsh. In several places the Old Testament reaches back to that judgement. It underlines the pride of the city, its hatred of foreigners and its violation of the rights of the poor and powerless (cf. Ezek.16: 49; Jer. 23:14). Sodom is a symbol of pride and xenophobia. In the New Testament, the city is also a symbol of corruption and aversion to God. Its destruction is a warning. When Jesus instructs his 70 disciples as they are sent out, he also speaks about cities where they will not be welcome. The fate of Sodom, says Jesus, will be more bearable than the fate of the city that will not show hospitality to the evangelists (Lk. 10:12; Matt. 10: 15; 11:24).

Still, it is not only the violation of the rights of guests that play a role in the crime of Sodom; it is also the anti-natural manner in which this violation occurs. This is pointed out in the Jewish-Hellenistic tradition, as is exemplified in Philo, for instance. In the New Testament Peter speaks of "filthy conduct of the wicked" in Sodom and "their lawless deeds". (2 Pet. 2:7-8). They cared neither for God nor for His law.

Jude in his letter also recalls Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities. According to the Apostle their residents committed fornication and whoredom, and had gone "after strange flesh" (7, 8). Most likely this means that these citizens wanted to have intercourse with angels who had taken on the stature of men. Jude underlines the pinnacle of immorality. Just as the men of Sodom sought intercourse with angels and rejected the limits imposed by God, so the false teachers of his day sought sexual activity that transgressed the boundaries God has set. Jude warns against this. Implicitly, his rejection of sexual behavior that violates these boundaries therefore also includes a rejection of homosexual behaviour in general. In view of the situation in which they found themselves, the Apostles Peter and Jude provided their own

point to the history of God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. They exhorted their readers to live holy lives. The judgment of God will inevitably fall on debauchery and immorality. Paul may also have considered this when he wrote about the judgment of God (Rom. 1:27).

While it is true that sexual intercourse of men with men took place in Sodom, this text passage in itself gives us no explicit directions for a pastoral approach to homosexual brothers and sisters who seek the fulfillment of their loneliness. The situation in Sodom was a manifestation of the total depravity of the city. This is not applicable to brothers and sisters who want to take into account the will of God.

6. The shameful atrocity at Gibeah

The story of Sodom finds an echo in the history of the atrocity at Gibeah (Judges 19). Both stories are very similar. One difference is that Gibeah belongs to the covenant people. The city is located in the territory of Benjamin. The history shows the corruption in Israel in the time prior to the kings. Again: violence against guests, sexual violence and particularly intended sexual violence against a man. The latter violence, according to the story, is worse and more shocking than the rape of a woman.

A Levite spends the night in Gibeah. The men of the town plan to take him, but eventually they take his concubine. She does not survive the drama. When after this particular horror the Levite returns home with her body, he causes her body parts to be delivered throughout Israel. The people are greatly alarmed. All the tribes come together in Mizpah. There the Levite recounts that the men of Gibeah had threatened him with death. He tells the assembly what they had done to his wife, but omits to acknowledge his own role, in offering his concubine to the mob. During the assembly at Mizpah references are made to the intentions of the men of the city. Even though he does not explicitly tell what the men of Gibeah intended – sexual intercourse with a man - it is evident that this is what he means to convey. This is clear from his specific word usage.

In relating his version of the events, the Levite uses the word *nebala*. This means something like “vileness”. The people’s assembly adopts this expression (20:10). It is precisely this word that points to the original plans of the men of Gibeah against the Levite. What ultimately happened to his concubine is a crime, and also the violence against guests is terrible, but the way they want to humiliate this Levite guest is expressed with a separate word "shameful act" What clearly sounds through the story is the condemnation of this abysmal deed through which this man loses his honour and is reduced to nothing.

In contrast to the story of Sodom, this story depicts the deplorable state of the covenant people in those days. Things happen that have never happened in Israel from the date of the exodus from Egypt (19:30). Everyone does what is right in his own eyes (21:25). Homosexual acts, also, appear in a range of violent and perverse practices. What we already noted regarding “Sodom”, applies also in this narrative: the event itself and the phenomenon of homosexuality cannot be placed on one line. Affection between people of the same sex plays no role here.

7. Conclusion

In and of themselves, the texts discussed in this chapter leave no room for homosexual relations and lifestyle. Another question is what weight we ought to give to this. Old Testament commandments were specifically addressed to Israel. The validity of these commandments is not always in full force in the New Testament church. When dealing with texts from the New Testament, we must also remember that they are written in a particular setting. In the next chapter we will see how, beginning from these texts, we can reach the actuality of today. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, we will also place these texts in the context of the Scriptures as a whole.

VII THE TEXT OF THE BIBLE AND ACTUALITY

On the basis of the texts discussed in the previous chapter, the Christian church has for centuries rejected every kind of homosexual relationship. It did this to follow Scripture. We also want to do that.

Still, simply quoting the Bible passages discussed will not suffice. These texts were given in a specific context – a context which is different from the culture in which we live. Does the authority of a prohibition on homosexual intercourse, given in the context of then current cultural prejudices, apply in our culture? We cannot simply draw a direct line from the texts quoted to members of congregations living in a same-sex relationship of love and faithfulness today.

Moreover, we must remember that the Old Testament commandments were specifically for Israel. These commandments are not always applicable and valid for the New Testament congregation. We can also ask questions about the New Testament texts; for example: does what Paul wrote apply in our situation? A process of weighing and consideration is needed. This process will have to indicate whether, possibly, there is room in the church today for a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness.

This process cannot ignore the significance of the Holy Scriptures for us. We will give this our attention in the first section, below. As we do so, it will become clear that that this report on homosexuality and homosexual relationships stands in a tradition in which the Reformed confessions set the direction. One of our principles is that we compare Scripture with Scripture. That means, among other things, that we want to read Scripture in its immediate and in its broader context. The broader context we will discuss in the second section, below. After that, we will try to place the question of homosexuality and homosexual relationships into the whole of Scripture.

We can then enter into the question if the Bible writers were possibly aware of the phenomenon of 'homosexuality'. That was already briefly mentioned in the discussion of the letter to the Romans but now we want to enter further in to this question from the perspective of hermeneutics. This point touches the degree to which the Scriptures are time-bound. Some would argue that the Bible does not speak at all as we do of homosexual orientation. How could we then, from the same texts, derive a prohibition on same-sex relationships experienced in love and faithfulness? We must consider how to deal with such a position.

Then, various Biblical root words will be considered. Could these words be a means by which we may place these texts in a proper light? In addition, we will have to pay attention to the authority of biblical commandments – first to those in the Old and then to those in the New Testament.

1. Scripture and its Exposition

The question of the authority of the Scripture texts that were discussed in the previous chapter is not separate from the question of the authority of the whole Bible. We confess that the entire Bible is authoritative for us. It teaches us sufficiently what is necessary for salvation (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15). The Holy Scriptures also speak of God's will regarding our lifestyle. And here, too, it has great authority. And yet, to understand the will of God from Scripture today is not always easy. We are children of our time and read the Scriptures with twenty-first century eyes. The danger exists that we interpret texts in ways never intended by their writers. It is also possible that we may overlook matters that were meant but not explicitly expressed.

Most important, however, is that all of the Scriptures are authoritative. This authority, however, we do not recognize of ourselves. In it we see the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit testifies in the heart of the believer that the books of the Bible have divine authority (cf. B.C.5). Thus, we speak about "the Word of God." What the Bible writers wrote was inspired by the Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16). They are engaged by Him and "driven" (2 Pet. 1:21). Precisely because of their divine nature, the Biblical writings are reliable (2 Pet. 1:19). The apostles spoke that way about the Old Testament Scriptures, but we confess that the New Testament writings bear the same divine character. Whoever would understand the Holy Scriptures will have to listen in a believing and expectant spirit. He must bow before its divine authority with, "Speak, Lord, your servant hears."

At the same time, the Bible is a book written by men. God has used people, including their abilities, motivations and feelings. They lived in a particular cultural and historical situation, different from ours. As a result, the writing breathes the atmosphere of the world of the authors. The Spirit stood outside neither their historical nor their personal situation. In this human dimension of Scripture, the aspect of history plays a part. God's revelation regarding his people displays a certain development. The development of the old to the new dispensation is central. God has entered history with his revelation. Although the Holy Bible exceeds the limitations of a particular historical and cultural context, it does give witness to a historical development.

This human character of the Bible does not compete with its divine character: the one does not detract from the other. Both aspects are inextricably connected. They both serve for instruction in the Kingdom of God, for refutation of misconceptions, the improvement of the way of life of the believer and nurturing in a life that reflects the will of God. The purpose of this is that the believer develops his potential and is equipped for every good work. That applies both to the Old Testament (cf. 2 Tim. 3: 16-17) and the New Testament writings. These writings are source and norm also in the question of homosexuality and homosexual relationships. We discover this

character of the Scriptures only when the Author himself gives us insight. And He has promised to do that.

The Spirit who moved Bible writers, will lead His own into the truth, give insight and enlighten them. This enlightening with the Spirit is indispensable for the understanding of God's will (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). Therefore, in the explanation of the biblical text, we rely on the Spirit. However, for that, the Spirit particularly uses the Bible itself. Therefore, we could also say that Scripture is its own interpreter. For example, a difficult text portion may become clearer to us through its context. That context may be the specific passage, the whole book, or the literary genre to which the relevant section belongs; however, this context also includes the totality of what is written in the Bible. A detail of a painting comes alive only when we take the whole of the painting into consideration.

Another important point in the interpretation of the Bible is that it has a core: the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God in Christ. The message of this Kingdom shines on everything in Scripture that surrounds it. Without a view of that core message we cannot fully grasp the whole message. Neither can we then have a good view of the topic that has occupied us: homosexuality and homosexual relationships. Therefore, we will also say something about the core message and the whole of the Scripture in connection with our theme.

In addition, we realize that in this dispensation we only know in part. We hope to come to an understanding that does justice to the Scriptures, the work of the Spirit, the great Interpreter of the Scriptures, and to the position of the believer and his responsibility. But we also realize our limitations and know that at times the church made definite pronouncements that it later had to retract. That danger is present. But a potential hazard may not prevent us from drawing straight furrows. Caution in speaking must not be at the expense of the clear articulation of the knowledge and insight that has been received at a certain moment. In dealing with a matter that so deeply affects the lives of people, prayer for knowledge and understanding is most fitting. Hence, we also pray that God will keep us from stumbling.

2. Homosexuality in the Full Breadth of Scripture

One of the principles of Reformed hermeneutics is that Scripture is to be compared with Scripture. This also means that the Scriptures discussed in the previous chapter, must be viewed in light of the whole Bible. That is our aim in this section.

The core message of the Bible is the coming of God's kingdom in Christ. That coming is His response to the fall of mankind into sin. This core message certainly affects the subject that concerns us here. God has given mankind the good gifts of sexuality and marriage. Because of

our sin against God in which we all, without exception, participate, these gifts are seriously broken. One of the expressions of this brokenness is the existence of homosexual feelings and a corresponding orientation. Such feelings and orientation were not originally intended.

That is not to say that those who have such an orientation should feel guiltier than those who do not. We already dealt with this at the beginning of the previous chapter: we now underscore this. Something for which you have no direct responsibility does not increase your personal debt.

We will try to indicate what constitutes the brokenness of a homosexual relationship and interaction. Our starting point is in God's original purpose. We may say that this brokenness consists of a lack of focus on a person of the opposite sex. Within a homosexual relationship this translates into something that is lacking: the two partners are not directed to the other sex. That unity lacks the foundational distinction; the partners lack that creaturely distinction which exists between husband and wife. They do not complement each other in these roles; in that sense, they do not complete each other. So we can say that something is missing in such a relationship: either the aspect of the man or of the woman. Furthermore, this relationship lacks the fundamental opportunity to receive children, a possibility which is given to husband and wife in the creation order.

The origin of these and other forms of brokenness in the field of sexuality and marriage lies in the fact that all of humanity has fallen into sin. In one way or another, each person experiences the results of this brokenness in this area or in others.

Although mankind, from its origin, has turned away from its Creator, He has not abandoned it to its fate. From His unfathomable love He began a path of recovery. This way runs through the covenant which, in His grace, the Almighty established with Abraham. The Covenant of Grace contains rich promises focussed on the restoration of the broken creation. In this covenant, God chose Israel. Israel had to proclaim and magnify His Name amongst the nations; however, the way of recovery by means of the old covenant people proved to be impossible. God's instruction shattered against hardened hearts. That does not mean that we simply lay the blame at the feet of the Old Testament covenant people. We are participants in the history of Israel – it is our history.

God, however, opened a new way. In Christ He gives that which was promised in the Old Testament. He remains faithful to the covenant promises once given. Christ restores the brokenness of our existence. In Him God causes His Kingdom to come. We may share in that. God gives this in the way of faith. Faith shares in the salvation of the Kingdom. That salvation focuses first of all on the relationship with God but its radiance extends beyond that.

One of the key moments of that recovery is the gift of forgiveness of sins. God bestows this forgiveness in Christ. He seeks out especially those who live on the edges of society and who are judged to be worse by others. Jesus showed that when He sought out prostitutes and publicans. People who thought they were righteous in themselves were not called by Him. It was sinners that he sought out; sexual sinners also were accepted by Him.

But there is more. In Christ God also gives us the gift of liberation. He sets free, among others, people who are trapped in a self-styled struggle for acquittal before the throne of God. That struggle for freedom might consist in a reliance on the complete obedience demanded by the Mosaic Law. That reliance is vain. Ultimately, the Law is a slave master. It keeps in captivity those who rely on it. It produces nothing but death. Christ, however has defeated this power of the law. He has fulfilled all the requirements of God's law, and bore the punishment that we had earned by our law breaking. How richly blessed is he who expects his salvation from Christ (cf. Gal. 3:10). He receives life through faith in Christ, who is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4). In that sense, whoever trusts in Christ is no longer under the law – also not the law of Levitical sanctification.

Whoever considers himself to have kept the law of God also as it pertains to sexual matters, can and may not boast before the face of God over against someone who evidently transgresses the ordinance of Scripture in this area. He may not consider himself to be better. The Law that God gave to His covenant people brings no salvation; on the contrary, it demonstrates that people who expect their salvation from the Law of Moses are sinners. Instead, God has opened a new way of restoration and salvation, outside of that law. Acquittal is provided but only in the way of faith. That way is open to all whose trust is upon Christ and His atoning death (Rom.3:21-26). Those who are in Him are not under the law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

The liberation which God gives in Christ also affects the powers manifest in the area of the sexual. His salvation affects the whole of the physical and psychological existence of man. God desires to restore any kind of brokenness, also sexual brokenness. In itself this redemption in Christ could already, in our present earthly existence, begin to restore the damage in our sexual orientation.

While some of this restoration may already become visible, not everyone will experience it in the same way. The salvation “already” come, has “not yet” become full reality. This is also true for those who have strong confidence in the Lord. The believer who has little experience of that renewal will continue to have a thorn in the flesh (1 Cor. 12:7). This is a particularly difficult situation. Still, redemption in Christ does give the believer the gift of re-creation according to the image of God: a new identity in Christ. That brings the believer to following Christ. And this following involves self-denial, taking up his cross and following in Christ's footsteps. We hope to

say more of this in the section on pastoral assistance, below.. Then also the comfort and the power of the Gospel will be brought into in focus. This is certain: God has promised the help of His grace and Spirit.

For believers redemption means a new life in imitation of Christ. He gives these gifts "... to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him and are thankful for them." (H.C. Lord's day 45). However, this new life does not mean that the law and all its provisions no longer apply. It is precisely in being bound and obedient to God's commandments and regulations that love for Christ is expressed. This is very clear from the New Testament. A Christian must rid himself of the practices of darkness, gird himself with the armor of light, live honorably and abstain from things that compete with the liberation and renewal that God gives His followers (cf. Rom. 13:12-13). That honorable life is also related to sexuality and sexual relationships. Attitudes or actions that do not please God cannot have a place in this life. That which belongs to the old life must be forcefully resisted. This can become a strenuous contest in the believer's life (cf. Matt. 5:29-31). However, in that battle, the Holy Spirit will give support and strength for a life according to the will of God.

This brief representation of the whole of the message of the Bible we can summarize with the words: creation, fall and redemption. This summary also touches the matter of homosexuality and homosexual relationships.

3. Homosexuality and the Time-Bound character of Scripture

The previous section discussed same-sex orientation within the whole of Scripture. God created humanity good, but it has fallen into sin. As a result there is much brokenness, including in the area of sexuality. This brokenness is reflected in the Scriptures that were previously discussed.

The question is how we should evaluate these texts. Do they also describe the issues we face today? In biblical times, the phenomenon of a homosexual orientation was not a topic of specific reflection. This shows in the way in which Paul writes about homosexual behavior. He mentions the word *chrèsis* ("use"). Men have left the natural "use" of the body of the woman. That word *chrèsis* can also be translated as "intercourse" (Rom. 1, 26-27). The apostle does not speak of feelings or orientation.

Some have the impression that Paul was not familiar with a possible deep interconnectedness of homosexual orientation and personhood. There is also the impression that he had knowledge only of behavior of people who engaged in incidental and unattached contacts. It is thought that his judgment on homosexual behavior would have been milder had he had a clearer insight into the question of homosexuality and had known people who lived in love and

faithfulness in a same-sex relationship. We are thought to know more than Paul, and able to draw other conclusions. It is important, therefore, to know what people living in that culture knew or did not know.

In the classical period of ancient Greece a grown man could develop affection for a boy and have a sexual relationship with him. That relationship was in a broader setting. This setting was the induction of the boy into the world of adulthood. Pedagogical aspects were related to it. Homosexual contacts took place within that framework. However, a relationship between two adult free citizens was not acceptable.

At that time, a relationship between an adult man and a boy was generally accepted. However, there were also men who were specifically oriented to the same sex, who had a special attraction for boys and men. The ancient world was familiar with people who had homosexual feelings from childhood. In that time also an explanation was sought for this same gender attraction. Plato (427-347 BC) identified what today is called sexual orientation. In his Symposium there is a speech by Aristophanes with a mythological story about the origin of men and women. This story talks about the first human-like creatures. They had four arms, four legs and two faces. Some were androgynous beings: both male and female. Others were doubly male or doubly female. According to this story, the god Zeus had split these beings, creating humans as we know them. One consequence of this event was that every man longs for the other half from which he was at first separated. People would thus have a sexual orientation that is inextricably connected to their personhood.

According to Aristophanes, then, homosexual orientation has its origin in an action of the gods. However, in those days the actions of the gods were open to debate. Therein lies one of the differences between the classical Greek period and the Archaic period, about which Herodotus writes. Certainly, Aristophanes criticized the activities of the gods. Perhaps the point of his speech was simply to entertain people. Not for nothing was he a comic poet. However, in his work, he does refer to thought passed on from the Archaic period, which reflect a realization that sexual orientation can also be innate. Aristotle (384-322 BC) also had spoken about that. He continually occupied himself with analyzing empirical reality. According to Aristotle, sexual orientation could arise, not only from one's experiences, but also from a sickly condition.

The idea that same-sex orientation was inseparably tied to the humanity of the person was familiar also in the Hellenistic period (323-146 BC), as well as in the period immediately afterward. The Roman writer Phaedrus, who lived in the first half of the first century, answers the question in a fable as why there are so-called *tribades*, women who have sexual intercourse with other women, and why there are *molles*, effeminate men. This fable tells of Prometheus, the creator of mankind, who comes home in a drunken stupor and attaches female genitalia to

a man and affixes the male member to a woman. Other authors from a slightly later time also indicate that sexual preference may be closely intertwined with the person.

Medical science at the time of the Romans generally held to the idea that homosexuality had a physical cause. Astrologers at that time assumed that sexual preference is determined by the position of the stars and planets. This preference would then already be fixed before birth. Yet, even according to them, such a preference was unnatural. Both were held to be possible: human destiny is determined and yet can be unnatural. In any event, data from ancient astrology and medicine show that many people assumed that sexual orientation was part of being human.

In view of the above, it is clear that awareness of sexual orientation existed well before the first century. That also appears to be so shortly after Paul's time. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that this realization was present also in the intervening time. It can be assumed that Paul also knew that sexual orientation was not always the result of personal choice. The apostle was an educated and well-traveled man. He knew his time.

Meanwhile, the presence or absence of a given inclination was not decisive for Paul. More important than a person's inner feelings and orientation was his place in family and society. Even though the apostle probably knew that deep inner feelings and homosexual orientation could be possible, yet in his letter to the Romans he made no distinction between the different situations in which one could come to a homosexual contact or a corresponding relationship. In view of the divine character of the biblical writings, we must add: the Holy Spirit had not led him to do so. Paul spoke about homosexuality in general terms.

As did the apostle, so several members of the Corinthian church may have known of the inter-relationship of sexual orientation with personhood. Paul writes that some had committed serious sins. Among the sinners he names *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:10-11). These church members, however, have put aside their earlier practices. Possibly they still experienced tensions with respect to their same-sex feelings. But they were left no room to express them. They joined in the existing order and assumed the role they had in their current society.

In our time, however, people rather go in search of their deepest "self". They look for who they are in the depths of their being, regardless of the role they play in their social relations. The focus on sexual identity is central. People are expected to develop this identity. Great value is placed on authenticity. That value should also be expressed in the area of sexuality. One of the ways in which this can be done is in the express experience of deep homosexual feelings. In that sense, homosexuality is a new phenomenon. It is seen as something arising from the hidden self, something that goes far deeper than the conventional roles of everyday life, something to which justice should be done.

By contrast, the Scriptures passages discussed do not speak explicitly about sexual orientation, but do speak of behavior. In this the time-bound nature of Scripture is reflected. The science of psychology, attention to the autonomy of the individual, and the debate about same-sex relationships arose later. However, this does not mean that we may lock up the meaning of Scriptures within their own time. The words of the Bible writers have a significance that transcends their own time and context. Therefore, we cannot simply say that we know more than the Bible. Its time-bound character at this point does not lead us to a conclusion that differs from that we have formulated so far.

4. Homosexuality and Original Biblical Terms

Scripture is the believer's primary source for his understanding of the will of God. The question is in what manner it has this authority. Many assume that Scripture presents a certain core concept that leaves room for the experience of a homosexual orientation in a relationship of love and fidelity. That concept would then articulate the deepest meaning of the Scriptures. From this principle the separate texts would then be understood.

4.1. Covenant

One important core concept is that of the covenant. This idea tells us that God has established a covenant relationship with man. This relationship is reflected in human covenant relationships. Just as God made a covenant with mankind, so human beings do with each other. This core idea proceeds from the notion that the covenantal relationship into which God has entered with mankind can be reflected in the relationship of marriage between husband and wife.

Some draw this line further and say that this covenant relationship can also be expressed in an alternative way of living together. According to them, God gave no blueprint for human coexistence. The form of a covenant relationship is not fixed for all times and places. It can change. The criterion for its articulation is humanity. That which serves the human condition depends on time, place and culture. It is claimed therefore that Scripture provides no fixed sexual moral standard; however, it does give an orientation for morality through the core idea of the covenant. Because the human condition and the patterns of human coexistence are constantly evolving, people themselves must fill in the meaning of the idea of the covenant.

This concept in itself is very valuable. As previously stated, it has an important place in the Bible. But the critical point is that its proponents detach this idea from the context of creation. The order that God has given is then subordinated to the governance of the covenant. By contrast, the Scriptures teach that the covenant does not annul the order of creation; rather, it is the way in which God heals broken humanity and directs it to its destination.

4.2. Love

A second key idea of the Bible is love. Love is a core concept and should permeate all of our relationships. Here, too, some would extend the line Scripture draws. They ask whether, for the sake of love, the Bible might not leave room for the experience of a homosexual orientation in a relationship of love and fidelity. If people are happy in such a relationship what can be said against it? People ask: What am I doing wrong? I do not harm anyone and am acting out of love.

According to this way of thinking, love is ultimately decisive for all human relationships. Hence, heterosexual and homosexual relationships are placed on the same level. Love is the key that unlocks the message of the Bible. While the texts forbidding homosexual behavior are associated with a past time, love must now lead to a deeper understanding of this message. It is then said that where love prospers, people will truly blossom.

The question is whether this idea does not cause love to stand in isolation. It then is separated from the whole of Scripture's instruction. It begins to compete with concrete commandments and the Bible's instruction about creation. However, the Scriptures teach that love is not at odds with the original order which God gave in the beginning. It confirms that order, restores it and leads it to development. Love is not a substitute for but the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13: 10). Whoever loves God also loves his commandments (cf. Ps 119.) and will keep these commandments (1 John 5: 3). Love between two people of the same sex cannot remove the need for obedience to the prohibition of homosexual intercourse in any form. Biblical precepts demand obedience.

In addition, the key word "love" is also used in a different way in order to make room for a homosexual relationship. In this sense, 'love' has become the standard of the speech and action of third parties with respect to this relationship. It accommodates to the choice of the other. This view arises from compassion and wishes to provide space for the other to reach his destination. In practice, however, such a view of 'love' can provide a broad interpretation. Love is then equated with tolerance. Especially in our culture, we see that the notion of 'love' has taken on a life of its own. It is detached from the whole of Scripture and filled from the spirit of the times. The idea prevails that people should be able to decide for themselves what they want: if by means of a homosexual relationship they can alleviate their loneliness, what is wrong with that?

On the other hand the motif of love can also be understood as active mercy and compassion for those in need. Some point to divorce in Biblical times. God's purpose is that husband and wife are bound in the marriage relationship for life; nevertheless, the Scriptures do allow for dissolution of marriage, even making provisions for that because of the recalcitrant nature of human society. Would not some similar exception, born from love and mercy, be possible for

people who desire to have a homosexual relationship so that the need of their loneliness is relieved?

One problem is that the analogy between divorce and entering into a homosexual relationship does not hold. Scripture does leave room for divorce in certain cases and therefore gives indications. The certificate of divorce given to a woman who is sent away by her husband is to prevent that she be abandoned to her fate. Similar provisions are not given by Scripture with regard to a homosexual relationship.

The conclusion is that the reference to the core idea of love as described above does not do justice to the whole of the Scriptures. In fact, in our day, this notion is filled by people's own ideas. One of those ideas is that someone can order his own life, as long as he does not harm others. This is not love as the Bible speaks about it. There, every kind of love is to be framed by the love for God. It seeks obedience to the will of God and to do what is pleasing to Him. Love therefore does not ignore concrete commandments. Such commandments and precepts set proper parameters for the ordering of human society. These commandments and regulations are as it were boundaries markers, within which life is protected and can flourish according to God's purpose.

4.3. Freedom

The core idea of "freedom" assumes that God is at work wherever people are being liberated from forces that hinder their wellbeing. This idea also can be employed in a plea for the acceptance of homosexual relationships in love and faithfulness.

This idea is consistent with a biblical motif. An example from the Bible is the liberation of women. In the ancient Eastern world, and long after that, wives were the property of the husbands. It is in that culture that the Biblical writings emerged, and to some degree the Bible reflects the thinking of its time. But Scripture says more. Ultimately it testifies that a wife is not the property of her husband. She is a person with her own value. In the history of revelation this has emerged with increasing clarity.

Another example is freedom for slaves. In Christ there is neither slave nor free. Some believe that today we should apply this thought also to people of a homosexual orientation. They would then have freedom to express to their orientation in a relationship. For a long time they have been oppressed. Even today they are sometimes considered inferior. The gospel, so the thought goes, brings liberation. God is present wherever people of a homosexual orientation are dislodging the forces of prejudice and subordination. The idea of liberation then functions as the key for understanding the Bible. The texts traditionally advanced to condemn homosexual practice are read from that perspective.

it is quite true that the concept of “freedom” has an important place within the testimony of Scripture. God frees people from the power of sin and death. But this message does not stand in isolation. It does not compete with the central message of Scripture that speaks about creation, fall and redemption. Indeed, God gives liberation, but not from structures that He Himself established for the good of mankind. On the contrary, He wants those structures to serve their rightful purpose.

There is something else. Regarding the position of women, the Bible reveals a certain development. There is a line recognizable which reveals an increasing level in their independent position. This also applies to slaves. In the end, says Paul, in Christ there is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free. Scripture, however, provides no support whatever to those who would use this same line in favour of establishing same-sex relationships.

4.4. Review

The notions of “covenant”, “love” and “freedom” fill an important place in the testimony of Scripture. We may not isolate these concepts, however. They stand within the framework of the whole of Scripture, including its testimony concerning God’s creation purpose. That intent should be given its due. The order that God has given is not subordinate to the notions of covenant, love or freedom. It has its own worth.

Covenant, love and freedom are not unbounded spaces. They are bounded by commandments that go back to God's creation intent. These commandments protect the essence of humanity. They are like boundaries. They set the parameters within which human existence in its relation to God comes into his own. Beyond those parameters, people and society suffer harm. This also applies to God’s commandment regarding sexuality and sexual relationships.

5. The Old Testament prohibition of Homosexuality

In forming a judgement on homosexuality, the Old Testament fills an important place. The apostle Paul, for example, reaches back to it. However, questions are asked about its authority. Many commandments we no longer obey literally. Why then would we do that with a prohibition of homosexual activity as we read explicitly in Leviticus?

For that reason, in this section we will focus on the question of how to deal with Old Testament commandments. Possibly we will gain a better understanding of the prohibition of homosexual activity and also gain further clarity in the forming of our judgements.

Two issues demand our attention: the unity of Scripture and the distinction that is present in it.

5.1. The authority of the Old Testament

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Scripture is a unity. It draws a continuous line. This line is the saving activity of God with His people and the world. The history of salvation began with Abram and through the work of Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection is continued with the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit produces the expansion of the Kingdom of God that has and will come in Christ. With the return of the Lord this kingdom will break through in glory and be visible to all. Both the Old and the New Testament provide the narrative of God's salvation to a lost world.

This continuing line is stronger than the differences between the two testaments. The God of the New Testament is none other than the God of the Old Testament. His promise is the same in each. This promise is: "I will be your God and you shall be my people". Not only the New Testament Scriptures speak of Christ, also the Old (John 5:39). That is how the Bible is. The unity between the two testaments is greater than their diversity. The Scripture cannot be broken (John 10: 20, 35). What God said to Israel, also reaches us. What He did with Abraham and his own is a part of the story of our salvation.

This unity is also apparent at the point of the commandments. In both testaments, these are founded on God's grace and love. Just as He, in the introduction to the Ten Commandments, speaks of the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage, so his rules for the New Testament church are placed within the context of liberation. God wants to preserve His people in true freedom. This unity comes to expression in yet another way. God meant His commandments not only for Israel: He wanted Israel to be a light for other nations.

This unity of God's commandments is also reflected in the preaching of Jesus. His teaching that He has fulfilled the Old Testament law does not simply mean that He has abolished it and replaced it with the law of love; rather, He teaches that He has brought the law to its fullness. On the one hand, this means that many of these laws are no longer to be observed literally; on the other, some of them apply with greater force. Some statements in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:17-48) prove this. In addition, In Matthew's gospel Jesus warns repeatedly against lawlessness.

The apostles continue in the same vein. They too teach the churches the Old Testament commandments. Paul, for instance, (Romans 12:19) mentions the prohibition of revenge. Another requirement is that a legal case can be established on the testimony of two or three persons (2 Cor. 13:1). Both rules are drawn from the book of Deuteronomy. Paul speaks in general about the value of the books of the old dispensation, inspired as they are by the Spirit. All Scripture proves its usefulness in improving and correcting the actions of the believer (2 Tim. 3: 16-17).

These and other scriptures prove that the apostles attach great value to provisions of the old dispensation. More than once the apostolic epistles refer to Old Testament commandments. What Paul points out in his letter to the Romans about the lifestyle of the world goes back to Leviticus, as indicated by the use of words as “uncleanness” and “lewdness”. More examples were given in the previous chapter. Thus Paul affirms the Levitical tradition. This also shows that the prohibition of homosexual intercourse recorded in Leviticus is more than an outdated cultic prescription. It is a prohibition that has authority in the New Testament dispensation also.

5.2. Reinterpretation of the authority of the Old Testament

Next to the unity of Scripture, there is also diversity. The difference between the Old and The New Testament is also revealed in a marked difference between the commandments of both testaments. To some extent, that difference also determines the weight that we give to the Old Testament commandments. In the process of weighing the Old Testament prohibition of homosexual activity there are some important steps.

First, we must consider into what category this prohibition falls. The Old Testament contains several types of commandments. It includes laws that are designed for worship. These ceremonial laws regulate the service of the priests ministering in the sanctuary, the sacrifices and the Sabbath. All these laws find their end in Christ. For the believers of the Christian congregation He is their great High Priest, the new sanctuary, the perfect sacrifice and Sabbath rest. Commandments which were specially designed for worship have found their fulfillment in Him. The veil is torn. By the one sacrifice Christ has sanctified his own once and for all.

In addition, the Old Testament contains laws that are meant for civil life. These laws include provisions for public life in Israel. For example, they set the penalties for breaches of the law. Regulations for family relationships describe forbidden sexual relations. Still other laws contain provisions for looking after the weak in society and dealing with widows, orphans and aliens. Some laws have both a civil and a ceremonial aspect. That is true for hygienic and dietary laws.

It would be difficult in our own situation to apply many laws literally. Living together in a Western society requires its own rules. It is not always easy to determine which prohibitions would be fully applicable to us and which are less so. Many proposals have been made in this area. A fairly common one divides the law into ceremonial, civil and moral laws. Ceremonial and civil laws would then have ceased, while in contrast, the moral laws would apply always and everywhere. This classification, however, is too coarse. The Old Testament has no separate chapters with moral laws.

There is a moral dimension present in all Old Testament commandments. Something is present in each of them that touches the essence of being human. God gave His commandments for the good of man and society. In certain commandments, the moral dimension is clearly

recognizable. These provide a signal as to what helps or hinders a person. An example of this commandment is love for the Most High. This commandment clearly indicates what most promotes man's wellbeing: the relationship to his Creator. Without love for God, a man does not reach his destiny. This also applies to the commandment of love of the neighbor. How could a man reach his destiny without love towards his neighbor?

This moral dimension is less obvious in other commandments. This is true, for example, about the prohibition to sow two kinds of seed into one piece of land or to use two or more kinds of fabric in one garment. Even so, the moral dimension is not missing here. Both of these prohibitions refer to the special position of Israel among the nations. The covenant people should not mingle with other peoples. Blending would bring harm. But when covenant children fully commit to their King and lead a holy life, that causes their humanity to flourish before the face of God. In this sense, we can recognize a moral dimension in such a prohibition. Also today's covenant people are called to a holy life.

All the Old Testament commandments contain a moral aspect, even where it does not stand out. These commandments have an inner reality that is true anytime, anywhere, to anyone - also for the church of the New Testament. The key is: to discover this inner reality. Knowing in which category laws forbidding homosexual acts belong may help us to discover that inner reality. Although the threefold division of categories in laws mentioned above is certainly not without its problems, a distinction between types of commandments is definitely worthwhile. In any case, taking into account the discussion of the texts of Leviticus above, we can say that the prohibition of sexual acts has more than a cultic dimension. This prohibition touches the human condition as it was intended by God.

In the second place, we need to consider the position and role the specific prohibition of homosexual actions has in the Old Testament. It is mentioned only once. This could create the impression that it is less important. This is not the case. It is clear why this prohibition is not further elaborated in the Old Testament. There was no doubt or debate about the force of this prohibition; hence, it had great weight. This is also the case in view of its function. We already noted in our discussion of the Leviticus texts that it protects the gifts of sexuality, marriage and family. It aimed to prevent the erasure of limits and prevent the disarray of social life. All in all, the ban had a central role in the social life of the people of Israel. At the same time, the prohibition went beyond the functions it had in ancient Israel.

In addition, it is significant that the ban on homosexual conduct is repeated in the New Testament. We see that clearly in Paul. This adds to its weight. Nevertheless, there is more to say. Not every Old Testament commandment that is reflected in the New, has the same weight. We will have to take into account the context in which it comes back. An example may clarify that.

The Old Testament prohibition against eating blood is also repeated in the New Testament. The apostles at a meeting in Jerusalem determined that Gentile Christians should refrain from eating blood. That is the most commonly held explanation. Yet, this prohibition against eating blood is not one that we generally keep. The reason for this is clear. In the Old Testament this ban was associated with cultic aspects. Possibly food hygiene also played a role. Because of its importance for the Jewish people, the church of the New Testament maintained that ban for Christians from the Gentiles. However, this was not a permanent provision, but a transitional one, given its strong Old Testament cultic function. The prohibition on fornication that was also mentioned during this Apostolic convent was different. That ban is permanent. It is repeatedly confirmed in the New Testament.

6. Homosexuality and the New Testament

Jesus and the apostles recognized the authority of the commandments of the Old Testament. The explicit gravity of commandments may have changed, but those that directly affect the humanity of man continue in force for the New Testament church. However, sometimes the New Testament presents a requirement that only has provisional validity, such as in the case of eating blood. Could prohibition of a homosexual relationship also not be a transitional provision?

Some believe that this is the case. Their reasoning is as follows: In the earlier times people were part of a collective. They were determined, formed and regulated by the social structure in which they lived. Everyone was required to conform. Individual identity played no role; only the norm of the group did. The dominant social mores tolerated no same-sex relationships or activity between free citizens. The Bible writers joined that culture.

However, this argument goes on to say, there is evidence in the Bible itself that it actually takes a different approach. A process of individualization is becoming visible especially in the position of women and slaves. We ought to extend this line of individualization, just as we have done with regard to the position of women and slaves. In our culture, the personhood of people with a homosexual orientation has emerged. Our culture no longer asks that people conform to prevailing standards. Instead, the realization of one's personhood stands at its centre. This line should be extended to homosexuals. Their personhood ought to come into its own and we have no right to deny them a same-sex relationship in love and faithfulness.

The question is whether this argument can stand. Admittedly, it picks up on a particular given from the Bible, but why just at the point of incipient individualization?

Moreover, there is the question of just how strong a point is that? The fact that the New Testament gives instructions which place more emphasis on the individual, does not mean that God-given ordinances are now invalid. Whoever therefore wants to adopt the motif of

individualization will be hard pressed to make clear why he proceeds from *this* motif and not to another. Another motif could be, for example, that of antithesis or sanctification.

When we consider what the Bible says on homosexual relationships, we see only one line, firmly maintained, and that is the line of prohibition. Adopting the motif of the antithesis in relation to the prevailing culture then appears to be the more reasonable way, rather than to link up with the motif of individualization. The conclusion is that an argument reflecting a supposed development from the New Testament does not help. On that basis, we cannot say that the ban on homosexual relationships, conducted in love and faithfulness, is a to be regarded as a transitional provision in the New Testament.

Another thought in this connection is that of adaptation. According to this principle, God Himself in His revelation always adapted to the culture of its time. For example, He did this in the phenomenon of polygamy. He initially allowed this in view of the prevailing customs of the time. Within his covenant community we could say the same of patriarchy. Could the prohibition of homosexual intercourse not have been an adaptation to the then current culture? If that is so, through the ministry of the Apostle Paul, the Lord must have had a specific goal in mind.

That goal might have been that He did not want to bring the gospel into disrepute in the eyes of the ruling culture, one that rejected homosexual relationships between two adult freemen. He did not want to create any hindrances to the gospel. All of Judaism, even that which had been strongly influenced by Hellenism, rejected a loving and faithful homosexual relationship. Nor was such a relationship tolerated in the surrounding pagan culture.

In our culture it is different. Many argue that a relationship of love and loyalty does not block the proclamation of the Gospel; instead, it actually creates space for the proclamation of the Gospel of God's love and grace. Specifically, those who have been marginalised by society can find a hiding place with God. The adjustment in the form of a prohibition made sense in the time of the New Testament, but not now.

This reasoning, however, is not tenable. How would we be able to speak of adaptation by Paul when he so clearly appeals to what God gave to mankind in creation? A homosexual relationship is contrary to the core of the Biblical message in which the motifs of creation, fall and redemption are central. Anyone who would give space to such a relationship comes into conflict with the authority of Scripture. The New Testament speaks clearly at this point. Even if Paul had not given any thought to Christians who are struggling with their sexual orientation and who, in dependence on Christ wish to enter into a loving, same-sex relationship, we still cannot ignore his words to us.

VIII - CHURCH AND CHURCH MEMBER

Scripture leaves no room for a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness. Each homosexual church member will have to give place to this truth in his personal life situation. However, in the process of the evaluation of various Bible texts, the question must be considered: what is an individual church member's qualification and liberty to form an independent opinion in seeking the will of God? In addition, we keep in mind that the believer is not on this search as an individual person. He does that with others. The church as a whole is looking for an answer. A pressing question is the following: what is the relationship between the authority of the individual believer in weighing Bible texts and the authority of the church community in that process?

1. Homosexuality and the individual church member

The process of applying the words of Scripture requires a clear, spiritual insight and sensitivity to discern what really matters (cf. Phil 1: 9,10a; Col. 1: 9). There is more to it than setting up a number of texts and then just literally obeying them. Some argue that an application of the words of Scripture in our time is totally impossible. The Bible originated in a completely different time and culture and therefore we would have to relativize its authority in moral matters. They would ask, "Does it matter whether Bible writers were or were not familiar with the idea that of homosexual orientation is closely associated with personhood? And if these writers were cognizant of these things, does it mean we have to accept their ban on homosexual intercourse?" Sometimes the Bible forbids what we, in our culture, find normal and acceptable. Many believe that the Bible writers did nothing more than affirm the morality of their own time. This biblical prohibition should be enshrined in the museum of history.

However, we cannot go this way. God requires obedience to His will. In this document we have striven to uncover this will. Based on this will we have drawn a conclusion. We are convinced that this conclusion will be the point of departure for the life of any who seek to be obedient to the will of God. Together with our Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 5, we declare that we receive the Scriptures for the regulation, foundation and ordering of our faith. This declaration applies to our lives and our actions also. Faith and action are a garment woven in one piece. What the Scripture says about our lifestyle must be applied.

This application is sometimes difficult, but not impossible. Christ has promised His Holy Spirit to His own. He leads them into all truth (John 16: 13); thus giving them wisdom and spiritual insight. Those gifts relate not only to matters of faith but also of morality. In that regard, too, the Holy Spirit leads to spiritual maturity. One characteristic of maturity is that the senses are trained by their use. They can distinguish between good and evil (Heb. 5: 13-14). That is what the Holy Spirit is willing to give to the believer: maturity and discernment. In growth towards adulthood the Spirit uses Scripture.

Not only does the Holy Spirit make the believer familiar with what the Bible says, but also sensitive to the speaking of God through the created reality. The voice of the Creator resounds through all this reality. To understand this, however, the word of Scripture is essential. God's voice through the created reality is not opposed to the word that God has committed to writing. This also applies to His speaking through the created reality of sexuality. The Spirit desires provide insight in this, but He does not do that apart from Scripture. This has been and continues to be source and norm for the actions of the believer. And that believer will not want to take any steps that cannot be authenticated by that Word of God, and for which that Word itself gives no indication.

A prerequisite for this guidance by the Spirit is union with Christ. This union gives longing for a life that responds to God's will and makes that longing increase. For this union is a union with Him who is anointed as prophet, priest and king. He was in full union with the will of his heavenly Father. The believer should know that this Christ is his brother, friend and king. Christ is joined to His followers by His Spirit. The life of the believer is characterized by its relationship to Christ. Whatever Christ has given him, the Spirit will work out in his life: victory over evil and a life in which God rejoices. And thus the Spirit causes the believer to search out what is pleasing to God (cf. Col.1:10; Eph. 5: 10.). This commitment to Christ does not hinder the human condition; rather, it enhances it. In other words, doing things in which God takes pleasure serves being human (cf. Rom. 12: 2). Commandments are given for blessing and wellbeing. For man, what is truly good is seen basically in his relation to his Creator. Based on what we can draw from Scripture, this relationship allows no room for a homosexual relationship.

We realize that this clear prohibition is contrary to what is acceptable in our time and what is experienced as serving human well-being. The rejection of such a relationship has, therefore, become problematic. For those involved in it, it is already difficult enough, given their own feelings, especially in view of prevailing attitudes within our culture.

This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the Bible gives us no concrete understanding into the deeper reasons why the rejection of such a relationship should serve humanity. For more than one reason, the Bible's prohibition of a homosexual relationship is therefore difficult to defend in our present time. For the secular man of our culture it is absolutely not clear how such a ban could possibly serve humanity. One would think that a relationship that meets personal sexual and relational needs would enhance human wellbeing.

The question is whether our understanding of the precise meaning of a biblical prescription is for us the criterion whether or not to act. We answer that question in the negative. Even if the purpose of a clear biblical statement is for us, limited people, not quite clear, we still may not set such a statement aside. Here, the authority of the true Word of God takes precedence.

In the line of the Scriptures, the Christian church has throughout history maintained the prohibition of homosexual acts and a corresponding relationship. Mistakes and major sins have been committed in the manner in which this principle was carried out and maintained in the past. The merciless and cruel application of this prohibition we reject in the strongest terms, but not its proper use. If we want to deviate from this prohibition, we must have good arguments. Such arguments we do not find in Scripture. It is true that sometimes it is possible to deviate from a line that traditionally was held to be authoritative but then the burden of proof lies with those who deviate from that line. In any event, we cannot discover such a deviating line in the Bible.

This does not mean that we should adopt the exact interpretation of the Old Testament prohibition of homosexual activity, including the application of penal provisions. We cannot and even may not adopt such provisions. They applied to ancient Israel as a civil society. Compared to the Old Testament, the New Testament sets a different standard at this point: the prohibition of homosexual act is maintained, the sentence is not .

The conclusion from this section is that individual members of the congregation can and should be held accountable for what has so far been put forward in this document. Now, we must also consider what is the role of the congregation and of the consistory (church council) in this. That will be considered in the following section.

2. Homosexuality in the Perspective of the Congregation

In the preceding section we discussed the attitude of the individual church member with respect of what so far has been presented in this document. We ought to expect that he will aim to direct his lifestyle and behaviour accordingly. This expectation also determines the position of the Church regarding this issue. It must resonate in preaching, pastoral work and catechesis.

2.1 Church member and Church Council

A church member does not stand alone; he takes his place within the whole of a congregation that will have to determine its attitude towards its homosexual members. Consideration must be given to the following, based on what has emerged in the vision document.

First of all, such members are no different from any other members. They are full and equal members of the congregation. The church will accept them lovingly, support them on their way and cause them to share fully in the fellowship of the faithful. We cannot nor want to exclude them from any position in the Church, not even from an office.

This fundamental acceptance does not exclude that also these brothers and sisters are bound to what Scripture says. Every church member will have to move within the parameters of the Word of God. This has been underscored in the previous section.

Nevertheless, in practice it may happen that a church member holds to an interpretation of what the Bible says which differs from this vision document. He considers that in the light of the Bible there is room for a same-sex relationship in love and faithfulness, and actually does so. Here, we are not talking about a member who, by his attitude and action distances himself from the core of the gospel; rather, we think of someone who participates faithfully in the life of the congregation, searching for the will of God, and still believes that the Scriptures say something different from the position the church council has taken. He considers himself to be directly accountable to God. Of course, this may be said of any professing Christian. He wants to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and in doing so he is not bound to any other power above him that interprets Scripture. God speaks directly to the believer by his Word and Spirit. A Christian has his own responsibility regarding the manner in which he orders his life pattern.

But how should a church council act in such a case? Two responsibilities oppose each other: the responsibility of the church member, drawn from his understanding of the Word and that of the church council, also drawn from its understanding of that Word.

When the person in question is a member of the congregation through having made public profession of faith, the church can and should point to the promise he made at that profession. Anyone who makes a public profession of faith promises that he will voluntarily submit to the pastoral oversight and discipline of the church council. This rule of willing submission rests on the specific position of elders with respect to the congregation. They must provide spiritual leadership and ensure that everyone in the church is a living member of Christ, and that this will become evident in the practice of life. They should point the congregation to its calling to win others for Christ by its actions. Those who do not live according to the rules of Scripture need to be exhorted and Christian discipline must be applied to those who show no repentance. Proceeding from their spiritual authority, they should give heed that the congregation does not deviate from what Christ has commanded.

In doing this, elders articulate what the communion of saints has understood from the Holy Scriptures to be the will of God. That community includes the church today, but also the community of believers of ages past. The core of their office is found in the interpretation of the Bible. The heart of the office-bearers' work beats in hermeneutics: if there is no interpretation of Scripture there can be no obedience to Scripture. For that reason elders have the authority to judge what militates against the honour of God and the holiness of the church. That authority comes with an imperative: they must watch that the church does not depart from the law of Christ.

Weighing the responsibility of the believer against that of the council, we must conclude, on the basis of the authority of Scripture, that the council's responsibility is the heavier of the two. It speaks from what it, jointly searching with the community of saints, has found to be settled and binding in the Word of God. The prevailing rule then is that the church member will have to submit to the supervision and discipline of the church council, which has its own competence in the interpretation of Scripture. That interpretation it articulates, in responsibility towards the congregation committed to its trust. The church member will have to comply with this. This may be expected of him, in virtue of the promises he made when he publicly professed his faith. That is what the Scriptures teach us.

2.2. Church and Synod

Regarding the question of the interpretation of Scripture, the judgment of the church council is has greater weight than that of an individual church member. This being so, the church council carries a great responsibility.

Practice shows that there are questions it alone cannot answer. The question about homosexuality and homosexual relationships is an example. It is almost impossible for the church council on its own to provide an answer that is acceptable to the congregation as a whole. The matter is too complex. This complexity was recognized by the General Synod of 2010. That Synod appointed a study committee, and also instructed this committee to seek advice from the professors of the Theological University at Apeldoorn. In practice, it also became evident that a local church, in a matter so controversial and so narrowly tied to the interpretation and application of Scripture, is hard pressed indeed to provide a non-controversial judgement. Via the ecclesiastical route of classis and particular synod, this question from a local church arrived on the table of the General (i.e. "national") Synod of 2007.

This procedural method of working, in which a local church calls for the assistance of the federation, has great value. The union of the churches is reflected in this. A church council does not stand alone. Affairs beyond its competence may and should be discussed in a broader context. Of course, not everything can be discussed in great detail. It must concern ecclesiastical matters, and then only those that cannot be dealt locally or of which the council judges they are pertinent to the broader assembly of the churches in common (Church Order, Article 30). Our churches have agreed that what is decided in broader assemblies will be held to be settled and binding. This also includes the question at issue here. Certainly, this is a matter which affects the entire denomination.

An instruction was sent to the General Synod of 2007 regarding the question of homosexuality and homosexual relationships. That synod decided that a subsequent synod would provide a

ruling on the matter. Such a synodical declaration is binding on the churches. The rule in our federation is that what a synod decides is received as settled and binding unless, at a later stage, it is declared to be in conflict with Scripture, the Confessions and the adopted Church Order. A declaration by the General Synod shall be deemed to have been declared by a separate church council.

Our form of church government is presbyterian and synodical. The elder (presbyter) has a prominent place but, in a derivative sense, also the synod. Especially regarding matters in which a local church, alone, cannot decide, a declaration can and should be made by a broader assembly. That serves the church, and also those who are affected by such an ecclesiastical ruling. In this case, with a view to homosexual brothers and sisters, clarity is needed. They are members of a local church but also belong to a denomination. Ecclesiastically speaking, it would be absurd that, in the event of transfer to another congregation of the CGKN, church members would be confronted with a different pastoral policy on homosexuality.

It was right and proper for the General Synod of 2010 to decide that a declaration should be made. That statement, based on this vision document, cannot be otherwise than that a homosexual relationship is contrary to what God teaches us in His Word, and therefore touches on His honor and the sanctity of the church.

A member of the church who is convinced that there is room for a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness, must be pastorally addressed by the church council. Such a conversation may be conducted in no other way than in the spirit and mind of Christ: loving, careful, serious. In this context Scripture speaks of “admonish”. Should this admonition of sin, one which is of a public and offensive character, not lead to a change of lifestyle, then Scripture, confession and church order point to the path of church discipline, however painful that may be for those involved. The Word of God is our guide in this. The confession of our churches agrees with this and is clear on this point.

This path is also consistent with a synodical decision of several years ago when it addressed the issue of *de facto* relationships. We realize that the entering upon and following in this path requires a lot of wisdom on the part of church councils. Walking this road and the troubles that this can bring will be further discussed in the next section of this rapport.

In addition, we realize that our ecclesiastical speaking cannot stand in isolation. It must be rooted in our lives. Both will have to be kept in mind: on the one hand, mutual love and mercy; on the other, a pure zeal for the holiness of Christ's church and the honour of His name. In our speech and in our lives we depend on Him who leads and rules His Church. We pray that especially in our speaking about homosexuality and homosexual relationships, He will fill us

with wisdom and sensitivity to discern the issues. Only then we can look expectantly to the day of Christ, when sin and brokenness will be removed.

IX - ECCLESIASTICAL DECLARATION

It is our conviction that what is written in this vision document is in line with the teaching of Scripture. We hope it is a sufficient basis for an ecclesiastical ruling. The General Synod of 2007 stipulated that no ecclesiastical declaration may ignore what was laid out in the pastoral guide of 1986. The statement must also fit within the framework of the Reformed view of Scripture. Furthermore, questions about homosexuality may not be approached in isolation. They must be approached from the biblical vision of human relationships, love and sexuality. These provisions were upheld by the General Synod of 2010 when it instructed the study committee on homosexuality and homosexual relationships.

Below we present a proposal regarding the formulation of an ecclesiastical ruling that we believe meets the above criteria. This proposal involves a number of separate statements:

1. The General Synod acknowledges that in the past in the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken there has generally speaking been too little specific attention for a pastoral approach, in word and deed, with regard to homosexuality and homosexual relations.
2. Within the Church of Christ members with a homosexual orientation have the same position as other members of the congregation. Their orientation has no bearing on this. They are full-fledged and equal members of the congregation, share in the mutual care and are engaged with their own gifts for the edification of the whole.
3. Sexual relations between people of the same sex, and relationships in which such dealings are given expression, are not in accordance with the Word of God and should therefore be identified as sin. In dealing with this sin the Church, expressing its pastoral responsibilities, is to follow the path of ecclesiastical admonition in accordance with Scripture, the Confessions and the Church Order.
4. The application of this instruction of Scripture with regard to homosexuality and homosexual relations is to take place with the mind of Christ, through preaching, catechesis and pastoral care.

In this position paper, we have desired to gauge Biblical teaching about a same-sex relationship. On that basis of the foregoing, a proposal has been made for the formulation of an ecclesiastical declaration. In line with with the Synod of 2007 the General Synod of 2010 also gave the study committee a second task, namely to serve the churches with a pastoral guide which pays attention to all relevant aspects of the place that homosexual brothers and sisters have in the church of Christ, and the pastoral attention given to them .

During the period of its reflection the committee became increasingly convinced of the value of such a guide. Homosexual brothers and sisters need special pastoral care. Many suffer feelings of insecurity, loneliness, doubt or fear. They know how the Bible speaks about it, but their feelings sometimes, or perhaps, often long to go another way. Therefore, a guideline is more than necessary.

The aim is that these go out to pastors and church councils. Your committee make a proposal regarding the method of publication of this guide. We consider it advisable that this enters the churches together with the vision document. The vision document is the foundation of the pastoral guide. Church councils and pastors will only gain proper understanding of this guide when they have been made aware what moved the Synod to its pronouncement. On the other hand, the ruling and the vision that underlies it, call out for a pastoral approach. Vision document and pastoral handbook are closely connected.