

# What did Paul know about homosexuality?

*In the church debate on marriage and intimate relationships, it is often claimed that the apostle Paul probably did not know of any faithful and lasting relationship between two people of the same sex. Therefore, they say that the church cannot take into account his teaching on homosexual behaviour. This is an approach that is not true to history and has little credibility. - The historical record shows that different types of homosexual and bisexual behaviour, including stable homosexual relationships, was widespread and well known in Paul's time.*

## Paul – a global citizen

Paul came from the Greco-Roman town Tarsus, and was a highly educated Roman citizen. In the light of his journeys – including visits to Athens, Corinth, Antioch and Ephesus – it is almost unthinkable that he would not have had known about different forms of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman culture. Paul spent three years in Ephesus, a large town, and eighteen months in Corinth (see Acts 18:11; 20:31). Corinth was known for its sexual diversity, in fact the phrase 'to live like a Corinthian' meant to live a promiscuous life. Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth show that he was well-informed about the different forms of sexual behaviour.

## Some examples from Antiquity

of homosexual behaviour and references to it which were known in Greco-Roman culture.

- **Platon** (427–347 BC) writes in his dialogue *Symposion* about a type of person who looks for woman-woman or man-man relationships in their pursuit of erotic experiences. He writes the following about them: 'If they get married it is only because they are forced to by custom and tradition; they actually have no natural attraction towards marriage or having children' (*Symposion* pp. 191–192).
- **Aristotle** (384–322 BC) touches on homosexual behaviour in *Nicomachean Ethics* (7.5): 'Some are naturally like this, and others by habit, such as those who have been abused from a very young age'.
- **Seneca** (4 BC–AD 65) was the brother of Gallio, governor of Corinth when Paul lived there (Acts 18:12–17). Seneca was known for his love for young adult men. One of Seneca's students, Nero, who would later be emperor, publicly celebrated at least two 'wedding ceremonies' to men.
- **Martial** (ca. AD 40–104) writes about a wedding between two men, in which there was even a dowry contract. He also mentions the Stoic Decianus who 'took a husband'.
- **Plutarch** (ca 45–125 BC) discusses an ethical problem regarding relationships in his book *Erotikos*: a young man finds himself the object of both a man and a woman's affections. Who should he say 'yes' to? A spokesman for homosexuality argues that "attraction towards young men and women is about one and the same thing: 'Love'."

- **Straton of Sardis** (1st century AD) describes how a man can feel sexual attraction to a teenage boy. He ends by saying that if one is attracted to someone 18 or over, it means that one wants to establish a mutual love relationship.

- **Suetonius** (born ca. AD 69) a famous Roman author and historian, writes about Nero's successor, Galba: 'His sexual passions were mostly towards his own gender, towards strong, mature men'.

- In addition to numerous examples of homosexual relationships, there are many famous men from Antiquity who were known for their bisexual lifestyles. These included the emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Domitian, Hadrian and Trajan.

## Interesting resources

There exist a wide range of books and studies on sexuality and homosexuality in Greece and Rome in Antiquity. The books contain a multitude of quotes and examples on homosexual sex and love in Greek and Roman culture. They are taken from speeches, poems, graffiti, paintings, philosophic writings, magic spells and so on.

### Here are some examples:

- *Roman Homosexuality*, Craig A. Williams, 471 pages.
- *Greek Homosexuality*, K. J. Dover, 256 pages.
- *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome*, Otto Kiefer, 380 pages.
- *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, Bernadette Brooten, 446 pages. This book presents a wide variety of sources which show that lesbian love was much more widespread in Roman culture than was previously thought.

## Discussion questions

1. Read the text 'Paul – a global citizen'. Talk about who Paul was and what he did. If you have time, read Acts 9:1–20 and Galatians 1:11–2:21
2. Read the text with the examples from Antiquity. Talk about the similarities you see between our age and Paul's. What about any differences? Which challenges do we share with the first Christians?
3. Paul writes about homosexual conduct in three letters: Romans 1:25–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11. What consequences do you think that these passages should have for our own faith and life?

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