

## Introduction

The resources to accompany the forthcoming shared conversations on sexuality across the Church of England have now been published. The purpose of this paper is to do three things.

1. Explain what these resources contain
2. Provide an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses
3. Suggest how Evangelicals should respond to them.

### 1. What do the resources contain?

The resources produced to support the shared conversations are in two parts.

#### *Thinking through the process*

The first part, *Thinking through the process*, is a short handbook which is intended to explain the nature and purpose of the shared conversations. The handbook is in thirteen chapters.

Chapter 1, 'The Pilling Report,' explains that the handbook and the accompanying reader are intended to help take forward the recommendation for facilitated conversations about sexuality contained in the Pilling report of 2013.

Chapter 2, 'Shared and facilitated conversations: building trust,' explains the function of the facilitators in assisting the conversations. It then goes on to note that, while neither the facilitators nor the conversations have authority in the Church of England's decision making processes, the reports of the conversations will inform subsequent discussions about sexuality among the bishops and in General Synod. Finally it declares that the hope is that all participants in the conversations will 'have had a chance to speak and a chance to be heard accurately' and that they will 'have been able to explore the extent to which they can discern something of Christ in those with whom they disagree, and gain a clearer sense of the scope and limits to working together and exploring the extent and limits of differences.' (p.5)

Chapter 3, 'Mission in a changing social context,' states that the social changes which have taken place within British society in recent years mean that 'a broadly Christian world view cannot be assumed to be shared moral ground across society (p.7) and that 'the church's missionary task has to be framed afresh for a new context.' (p.7) The chapter notes that there are different missionary responses to the changing culture around sexuality in our society, with some emphasising affirmation and others confrontation, and it suggests that part of the conversation in the church needs to be about 'whether different missionary responses to contemporary culture must be contradictory or could be complementary.' (p.8)

Chapter 4, 'Resources for Conversation,' introduces the material in the *Reader* that has been published to resource the shared conversations. It explains that the purpose of including the two essays on Scripture and sexuality by Dr Ian Paul and Professor Loveday Alexander as well as commending the two appendices on the same theme by Bishop Keith Sinclair and Dr David Runcorn in the original Pilling report is to 'encourage all who take part in the shared conversations to engage in biblical scholarship and consider the competing arguments amongst academics in the field.' (p.11) It further explains that the paper by Dr Philip Groves reflecting on the 'Continuing Indaba' process in the Anglican Communion 'brings home the importance of the whole Anglican Communion in the

context of discussions on human sexuality, reminds us of the importance of the church's mission in all the world and considers how 'good disagreement' might develop from a clearer focus on mission.' (p.13) Finally, it explains that the paper from the Church of Scotland looks at the question of living with a 'mixed economy' of approaches to sexuality. It notes that the paper makes it clear that churches have accommodated even quite major differences in the past and states that 'the question which both the Church of Scotland and the Church of England are facing now is whether different approaches to human sexuality, and to mission in a social context where sexual ethics are changing rapidly, lend themselves to similar handling.' (p.17)

Chapter 5, 'Conscience and Pastoral Accommodation,' notes that the Pilling group suggested that the concept of 'pastoral accommodation,' introduced to it by Professor Oliver O'Donovan 'might offer a way for the church to make a pastoral response to lesbian and gay people who, in conscience, seek to mark their relationships in the context of prayer and the family of the church, but which would not imply that the church has abandoned its teaching on sexuality or marriage.' (p.20). The chapter declares that those participating in the shared conversations 'may wish to pursue' the question of the relationship between conscience and the teaching of the church and 'explore whether the Pilling Report's use of the concept of pastoral accommodation might, or might not, be a helpful way forward.' (p.20)

Chapter 6, 'Conflict and Understanding,' states that the purpose of the shared conversations are intended to take the participants 'deeper' into the range of views about sexuality among Anglicans (p.22). It stresses that the purpose of the conversations is not that those taking part should change their minds. Instead, the conversations 'are intended to help us find out how much we can agree on, how much difference we can accept in fellow Christians without agreeing, and where we find the limits of agreement to lie.' (p.22)

Chapter 7, 'Good Disagreement,' outlines what it is hoped the conversations might achieve. It begins by arguing that much good might be achieved whether or not the minds of those taking part are changed. 'If it is possible to recognise an authentic discipleship in the lives, views and practices of others, that will be a gain. If, conversely, conversations enable sharply drawn boundaries to be drawn between groups within the church who cannot in conscience share an ecclesial identity, we will at least know about the limits of unity. But there are many other potentially beneficial outcomes that may lead the Church of England into a less uncomfortable and more mission-oriented place.' (p.24)

The chapter notes that one possibility would be an increase in uncertainty as exposure to the views of others 'may makes us less sure that we alone know God's mind on this topic' (p.25) It acknowledges that not everyone would welcome increased uncertainty, but that it might perhaps 'usher in a period of more humble and prayerful reflection which drew the issue away from the very public forums in which it has, so far, tended to be debated.' (p.25) Another positive possibility, it suggests, would be the establishment of a greater degree of trust between those who disagree. 'If participants in the conversations can come to trust each other enough to believe that they are all motivated by a desire to follow Christ and to promote the mission of God and of the church, that would be by no means a negligible achievement.' (p.25)

Finally, if the conversations lead 'to a growing consensus around a particular position' the value of the conversations would be shown by 'the way in which those who would feel disenfranchised, marginalised or rejected continued to be heard, held, or loved' (p.25) and by the way in which the 'manner of our parting' with any who choose to leave the church reflected the 'the extent to which we have listened to each other, been open about our convictions and trust in the wideness of God's mercy.' (p.26)

Chapter 8, 'A Gift to a Divided World?' argues that it is not only within the church, and on issues of sexuality, that there seems to be an increasing polarisation between different positions. 'In numerous areas of public life, opinions are hardening between different viewpoints, and the space for reasoned debate is shrinking.' (p.27). In the light of this observation it asks 'is it possible that the way in which we have pursued our disagreements, with rising acrimony, accusations of bad faith, and little engagement across the divisions, is itself an unconscious concession to a secularising spirit?' (p.28) and states that 'one objective of the shared conversations is to model something more godly, to the best of our ability.' (p.28). It says that the conversations 'might enable Christ's church to present a gospel alternative to acrimony and confrontation – a model for understanding and handling human differences and disagreements – which a fractured world desperately needs.' (p.28)

Chapter 9, 'A Process for Shared Conversations,' describes how the shared conversations will take place, beginning with conversations at the College of Bishops in September 2014, moving through regional conversations involving clusters of dioceses and concluding with conversation at General Synod in York in July 2016. It also describes the role of the facilitators within this process and stresses that they 'will be fair to every viewpoint and position.' (p.30)

Chapter 10 'Selecting the Participants for Regional Conversations' explains that the responsibility for selection rests with the diocesan bishops and that the participants should be a mixture of bishops, clergy and laity. Those selected should 'reflect the balance of the views held across the diocese' (p.31), half should be male and half female, and a quarter should be under 25. There should be 2 or 3 LGBTI people in each diocesan delegation.

Chapter 11, 'Some Questions to Consider in Conversation,' lists 11 questions which are intended to provide 'an idea of the kind of questions which might form the basis of conversation, even if the dynamic of the encounter takes a direction of its own and throws up different topics for discussion.' (p.32) Examples of the questions are 'What is the church's missionary task today in relation to LGBTI people, and to the culture within which we are called to witness and minister?', 'What of the gospel is to be found in 'the other view?' and 'Should the church offer prayers to mark the formation of a faithful, permanent, same sex relationship? If so, what is the right level of provision that should be made?' (pp.32-33)

Chapter 12, 'Beginning and ending with Mission,' starts by quoting John 3:16 and argues that the conclusions of the conversations and the way they are conducted will shape the mission of the Church in the world. It ends with a reminder that it will be the task of the whole Church to hold the participants and facilitators in 'love and prayer.' (p.34)

Chapter 13, 'Prayer and the Shared Conversations,' declares that the conversations need be 'firmly grounded in prayer' (p.35) and commends two collects from *Common Worship* (the Collects for Mothering Sunday and the Ninth Sunday after Trinity) as 'especially apposite' for use in the conversations. (p.35)

### ***A Reader: Writings to resource conversations***

The second part, *A Reader: Writings to resource conversations*, consists of four essays 'chosen in order to allow participants in the conversations to engage with different strands of thinking on the subject, drawn from different sources.' (p.vii) There is also a short bibliography of books seen as useful resources for the conversations.

## Ian Paul 'The Biblical Case for the 'Traditional' position.'

The first essay is written by Dr Ian Paul and is entitled 'The Biblical Case for the 'Traditional' position.'

This essay begins by noting that the Church of England's teaching position on same-sex sexual activity, 'set out in a number of reports and motions' (p.1) endorses the traditional Christian belief 'that the teaching of the Bible is that heterosexual marriage is the proper context for sexual activity between two people.' (p.1) Paul then goes on to say that 'the Scriptural support for this position does not rely on proof-texting, but on a careful reading of the relevant biblical texts in their particular social, cultural and literary contexts as well as noting the close interrelation between a number of the texts.' (p.2).

Having made these introductory points Paul looks at a series of biblical texts relevant to the issue of same-sex relationships.

He begins by looking at the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. He states that in the first account in Genesis 1 'the idea appears to be that humanity, ('*adam*) male and female (*zakar* and *neqevah*), reproduce, populate the earth, and govern it as the offspring of the creator, ruling it as vice-regents and with his delegated authority. Thus the gender-binary nature of humanity is a key part of being in the image of God and fulfilling the commission to exercise delegated authority over the earth.' (p.4) In the second account in Genesis 2 the twin themes of unity and difference between men and women 'wind their way through the story like a double helix' (p.4) and at the conclusion of the account 'marriage between one man and one woman is presented as the unique place where humanity rediscovers its original unity and can fulfil the mandate to be fruitful, and for that reason it is the unique place for the 'one-flesh' union of sexual activity.' (p.5)

On Genesis 19 and Judges 19 Paul emphasises that the people of Sodom and Gibeah are described in the Bible as involved in a variety of forms of sin. Nevertheless, 'in both these narratives, wicked men, want to 'know' male guests who are enjoying hospitality. This is a Hebrew metaphor for sexual relations (as in 'Adam knew Eve and she conceived', Gen 4:1, AV) so modern translations are right to render this 'have sex with them.' (p.6) Furthermore, 'in both these stories the desire for sex with other men functions to emphasise the depravity of the men concerned; the reader is assumed to share the narrative's abhorrence of this.' (p.6)

On the story of David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 17-2 Samuel 1 Paul notes that a key concern of the story is to show that David and Jonathan (unlike Saul) match up against the pattern of the ideal man. This being the case, 'Since same-sex acts were considered shameful in Israelite culture at the time, this portrayal of Jonathan and David would have completely failed had their relationship been perceived in any way as erotic. To suggest that it was is simply to read modern, sexualising interests into the story, against the grain of the text.' (p.7)

On Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 Paul argues that the two verses 'offer a general prohibition on male same-sex activity, not confined to concerns about cultic activity, patriarchy or marital unfaithfulness, but rooted in the creation narratives, and specifically picked up and applied in the New Testament.' (p.10)

On Jesus and the Gospels, Paul notes that the fact that there is no mention of same-sex activity in the gospels is best explained by Jesus having accepted the consistently negative view of such activity taken by contemporary Judaism. This view is supported by Jesus generally conservative stance on sexual ethics, his comment about *porneia* (illicit sexual activity forbidden in Leviticus 18 and 20) in

Matthew 15:19 and Mark 7:21, and his appeal to the creation narratives in his teaching on divorce (Mark 10:6, Matthew 19:4).

Paul further argues Jesus seems to have viewed the Old Testament law as a source of ethical teaching and if anything his own ethical teaching was even more rigorous. In his dealings with 'tax collectors and sinners' (Mark 2:15-17, Luke 5:29-31 and Matthew 9:10:13) Jesus practised both 'inclusion and demand' in that he welcomed people but also called for repentance involving a change of life. This is something that is also seen in the decision about the inclusion of Gentiles in Acts 15 with the four-fold prohibition in Acts 15:29 probably including a prohibition of same-sex activity.

On Romans 1 Paul explains that St. Paul uses same-sex activity as a way of highlighting the fact that the world is idolatrous. The reason why he chose this rather than any other vice as his example is because he was 'influenced by other Jewish critiques of non-Jewish culture, in which same-sex activity featured strongly' and because this example 'fits well with his argument from creation, in that he can appeal both to the Genesis texts, and to the fact that male and female genitalia visibly fit one another, and in this sense same-sex activity is a rejection of the natural, visible intent of the body in a way that is analogous to the rejection of the natural, visible origins of the world.' (p.16)

This means that when St Paul refers in Romans 1 to what is 'natural' or 'unnatural' he is referring to what is in line with or against the way God created the world to be.

Paul quotes Richard Hays' summary of St. Paul's argument in Romans 1 as follows:

The aim of Romans 1 is not to teach a code of sexual ethics; nor is the passage a warning of God's judgment against those who are guilty of particular sins. Rather, Paul is offering a diagnosis of the disordered human condition: he adduces the fact of widespread homosexual behavior as evidence that human beings are indeed in rebellion against their Creator....Homosexual activity, then, is not a provocation of 'the wrath of God'; rather, it is a consequence of God's decision to 'give up' rebellious creatures to follow their own futile thinking and desires. (p.17)

On 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul argues that St. Paul's thinking is based on the teaching of the Old Testament and that the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* used in verse 9 refer to the passive and active participants in same-sex sexual activity, with the latter term being a neologism that is based on the Greek version of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. There is nothing in the text to suggest that what St Paul is referring to is either pederasty or economic exploitation.

On 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul notes that *arsenokoitai* forms part of a vice list based on the Decalogue and that it more naturally fits with the preceding reference to those involved in sexual immorality than to the following reference to slave traders. St Paul is therefore talking about male same-sex relations as a form of sexual immorality coming under the general rubric of the prohibition of adultery (adultery being extended to mean all sexual relations outside of marriage).

In his 'concluding observations' Paul argues that the texts that refer to same-sex relations 'offer a strong, consistent and linked disapproval of all forms of same-sex activity' (p.19) that is based on God's creation of humanity as a 'gendered binary' of male and female. (p.19)

He further argues that the biblical writers would not have been ignorant of stable, committed, same-sex relationships, but that the relevant texts 'show no interest in the form that same-sex relations

take.’ (p.19) This is because Scripture puts ‘the binary identity of gender’ rather than ‘sexual orientation’ at the centre of its theological anthropology. (p.19)

He goes on to say that both personal experience and the arguments put forward on the basis of science need to be scrutinised in the light of biblical anthropology and that there is no basis within Scripture that would allow the Church to change its mind on the issue of same-sex relationships in the way that it has done over issues such as women in leadership, slavery, divorce or usury.

The claim that the Spirit is ‘doing a new thing’ needs to be tested against the witness of Scripture and it is not legitimate to declare that the issue of same-sex activity can be viewed as *adiaphora* because it ‘does at times receive emphasis’ in Scripture and ‘several times is linked decisively with acceptance or rejection of God’s redeeming purposes.’ (p.21)

Finally, Paul notes that three liberal commentators (Walter Wink, Diarmaid MacCulloch and Luke Timothy Johnson) are clear that the Bible condemns same-sex sexual activity and that therefore acceptance of such activity involves rejecting what the Bible teaches.

### **Loveday Alexander ‘Homosexuality and the Bible: Reflections of a Biblical Scholar.’**

The second essay is by Professor Loveday Alexander and is entitled ‘Homosexuality and the Bible: Reflections of a Biblical Scholar.’

She begins her essay by noting in section 1 that the fact that both sides on the Pilling group ‘agree that the Church of England needs to take a firm stand against homophobia and in favour of inclusion and acceptance of LGBT people within the church (p.24) has a significance that has not yet been fully grasped. This is because ‘simply by talking about ‘homophobia,’ the Report represents a significant shift from the biblical viewpoint which sees homosexual practice as ‘sin’ and *has no concept of homosexual identity or ‘orientation’* (a concept which did not emerge until the 19<sup>th</sup> century). (p.25 italics hers)

As Alexander sees it, what we see in the Pilling report is an acceptance of the consensus in Western European society that ‘our sexual identity is not about moral choice but about ‘orientation.’” (p.26) However, this new consensus leaves us with the question of where this leaves the contemporary Christian? ‘If the world of the Bible and the world we live in have moved apart, like tectonic plates, where does this leave the Christian believer, with a foot on both sides, trying to straddle the cognitive gap? (p.26)

Her response is to say that ‘We have to stay with the Bible –but we have to find a way of making sense of it, in a world that is very different from the world (or rather worlds) in which it was written. This is one of the key theological tasks facing us in the church today; and in this paper I want to share some of the principles and strategies I would adopt, as biblical scholar, to tackle it.’ (p.27)

In section 2 she argues that we need to employ Scripture, tradition and reason and that the account of the admission of the Gentiles into the Church in Acts 10-15 ‘points us to a biblical hermeneutic that reads scripture as the word of the living God, a revelation whose meaning is not exhausted by its original context but must be read in dialogue with what God is doing in the present.’ (p.31) As she sees it, ‘Scripture calls us to a hermeneutic of attentiveness to the revelatory action of the Spirit in the word and in the world; of attentiveness to our dialogue partners in the dialectical process of revelation, inside the church and out; and of attentiveness to the story of Jesus, with its disconcerting habit of subverting all our moral certainties.’ (p.31)

In section 3 of her essay she acknowledges, like Dr Paul, that there are a number of biblical passages that prohibit same-sex relations. However, she maintains that these texts do not address our modern understanding of sexual orientation as a 'given.' In her view, 'for the few biblical writers who mention same-sex relations (as for other ancient writers), same-sex attraction is a moral disorder, a voluntary choice made by heterosexual people, and thus an expression of uncontrolled and often aggressive sexual desire.' (p.31)

Alexander then goes on to consider the questions of 'translation', 'canon' and 'culture.'

On the question of translation Alexander declares that the terms used in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Timothy 1: 9-10 'identify various forms of culturally unacceptable sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual.' (p.34) However, she also argues that:

'...the precise language used reveals a social construction of same-sex relations as a shameful distortion of 'natural' gender roles, in which one male partner takes a 'female' (i.e. passive, submissive, inferior) role. To use the word 'homosexual' in these texts is arguably to impose on Paul a modern concept that belongs to our world, not to his.' (p.34)

On the question of canon she asks whether Christians are 'bound by all the prohibitions of Leviticus (and if not, why just this one)?' (p.35) and also notes that 'we are called to read the Law in the light of the Gospel, not the other way round.' (p.35) She goes on to argue that it is significant that the Gospels 'contain no explicit teaching on same-sex relationships' and that even when homosexual practices are mentioned in the Epistles the mention of them is incidental rather than essential in the sense that other sins might equally well have mentioned instead.

On the question of culture she maintains that:

'Paul's reading of same-sex relations thus reflects the cultural scripts of his own culture. Starting from the fundamental perception that same-sex proclivity is a voluntary moral choice exercised by heterosexual people, ancient moralists saw it as an expression of violent and excessive sexual desire (*pathos*) — itself morally reprehensible, and frequently used as an expression of domination over social inferiors or subjugated enemies. It represented an 'unnatural' confusion of gender roles, and thus a distortion of the social hierarchies built into marriage and household. It belonged to the shadow-world of extra-marital sexual relations, thus necessarily unfaithful, impermanent, uncommitted; and was most likely to be encountered in the form of prostitution or abuse within the household.' (p.38)

She accepts that St. Paul might have known about the 'Platonic' ideal of a loving same-sex relationship between an older man and a younger lover, but in her view, even if he did:

'...it would not offer a model of faithful and stable same-sex relationships: such relationships, as we have seen, were inherently unequal, impermanent, and non-exclusive. In the Roman world (and especially in the mercantile/artisan urban circles in which Paul moved), same-sex relationships were most likely to be with rent-boys or with household slaves. In other words, Paul doesn't condemn long-term faithful same-sex relationships, for the simple reason that he doesn't know them: the homosexual activity he knows falls under the category *porneia* ('bad sex') because it is either abusive (abuse within the family unit, including slave-rape) or commercially exploitative (prostitution).'

In section 4 Alexander looks at what is said about sex and marriage in the Gospels and 1 Corinthians 5-7.

On the Gospels she states that Jesus affirmed marriage 'as a God-given, creation institution (Mark 10:2-12)' (p.40) and that in face of relatively easily available divorce he 'invites his followers to high standards of sexual fidelity and commitment (Matt 5:27-32).' (p.40) Jesus also recognised that there were people for whom heterosexual marriage was not an option (Matthew 19:12), adopted a celibate lifestyle, downplayed the importance of family ties (Mark 3:31-35) and insisted that marriage will not be part of the world to come (Mathew 12:24-25).

On 1 Corinthians 5-7 she argues that St. Paul gives two examples of bad sex (*porneia*), one is sexual abuse within the household (1 Corinthians 5:1-2) and other is a sexual relationship with a prostitute (1 Corinthians 6:16). She notes that 'these are not homosexual relationships: but (as we have observed), in Paul's world most same-sex relationships would fall under one or other of these broad categories.' (p.41). By contrast, she says, what St Paul thinks makes marriages holy is not marriage by a priest in church (which did not exist), nor procreation, nor maintaining traditional hierarchies between men and women, but sexual mutuality and a decision to serve the other.

According to Alexander, St Paul's preferred option in 1 Corinthians 7 is celibacy for both men and women, but he allows for marriage as 'a kind of pastoral accommodation for human sexual needs' and for divorce in certain cases 'even though it was forbidden by the Lord.'

In section 5 Alexander considers where this leaves the Church today.

She begins by re-iterating the point that the Biblical material is embedded in its original social context and that 'we have to use our God-given powers of discernment ('reason') to interpret what it means for our own context.' (p.45). She also re-iterates that 'Paul's condemnation of homosexual acts is a logical consequence of his construction of sexuality - and that construction is derived from his own first-century cultural world. Sever the connection, and the moral condemnation is without foundation.' (p.45)

This being the case what we need, she argues, is a sexual ethic that starts from our contemporary perception 'that a person's sexual orientation per se is neither immoral nor defective, but a 'given' of their sexual identity.' (p.46) She asks if we can 'construct a biblically-based theology that would allow LGBT people to engage in committed sexual relationships and find in them a source of grace?' (p.46).

Her answer to this question draws on Archbishop Rowan Williams argument that 'it is the combination of fidelity, commitment and mutuality that open up the possibility for a sexual relationship to be *sacramental*.' (p.47 italics hers) and the statement by the House of Bishops that 'a good marriage creates for each partner the same kind of environment which we recognize as promoting growth to maturity in the case of children: a combination of love and challenge within a unbreakable reliable relationship' (p.48)

In her view, 'it seems perverse to deny these benefits to those same-sex couples who aspire to live a life of fidelity, mutuality and commitment. Where LGBT couples want to reach out to this recognisably Christian ideal, why should the church deny them?' (p.48).

Finally, in section 6 Alexander highlights Luke Timothy Johnson's warning that 'there are two equal and opposite dangers in attempting to define the faith: defining too little, and defining too much.' (p.49) In the light of this she contends that 'we need to pay attention to what the creed does NOT define (like where you stand on women bishops – or gay marriage) – and ask, it is really essential? Is it a core Christian belief? Should this be how we define ourselves as Christians?' (p.50)

## **Philip Groves 'A Search for Good Disagreement.'**

The third essay, entitled 'A Search for Good Disagreement' is by Dr Philip Groves.

The essay begins by questioning whether the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 provides a helpful model for how the Church should handle contentious issues. Groves notes that according to Acts 15 'A middle way was found and peace restored' (p.53) and that 'If the reader stopped there without examining the rest of the New Testament, they would assume the issue had been solved for ever, the church was at peace, and no further comment was required.' (p.53)

However, argues Groves, the evidence of the rest of the New Testament presents a different picture. Twenty years later, in Philippians 3:2 St. Paul warns the Christians in Philippi about those still emphasising the need for circumcision. In Galatians 2:11-14 St Peter, the first advocate of Gentile inclusion, is reprimanded for refusing to eat with Gentiles because of pressure from emissaries sent by St. James who is enforcing a different line from that agreed when he chaired the Council of Jerusalem. Furthermore even what was agreed at the Council was disputed, according to Galatians 2:10 'Paul understood himself to have been sent to the Gentiles with one condition only – to remember the poor – with no reference to food laws or fornication.' (p.53)

According to Groves this evidence 'challenges the notion that a council is a simple solution to the deciding issues that emerge within churches.' (p.54) This is not just because councils may err (Article XXI) but because 'the 'sides' within a deep conflict are unlikely to be satisfied with the compromise and will actively undermine it, even if they have signed on the dotted line. Definitive middle way resolutions are rarely as definitive as they seem.' (p.54) This does not mean, he says, that councils and synods are not important, but rather 'that it is a positive gospel value to seek for good disagreement, and that this requires a focus on structures that enables us to proclaim Christ together.' (p.55)

Groves then goes on to argue that 'Disagreeing well was at the heart of the missionary strategy of the Apostle Paul' (p.55) and that:

The contemporary implications of Paul's methods were set out by Roland Allen in his classic *Missionary Methods – St Paul's or Ours?* Allen argues that Paul did four things to establish unity:

1. He taught unity by taking it for granted.
2. He used to the full his position as intermediary.
3. He maintained unity by initiating and encouraging mutual acts of charity.
4. He encouraged the constant movement of communication between the different churches. (p.57)

Groves draws attention to St Paul's relations with the church in Corinth as an example of this approach in practice. He notes that:

'Paul did not take sides in their bitter disputes, but called them to value one another, especially valuing the most vulnerable. He then expected them to take responsibility for settling their own issues. He did not sort out their issues for them, but he constantly reminded them of the core values that would see them reunited in one body. With trembling he sent Timothy to them, fearing he would be rejected by all for not taking sides. In the midst of this and in the context of their search for ultimate freedom Paul begged them to give with generosity to the Jerusalem community, the very group who he was accusing of

legalism. This was not just about feeding the poor; it was about building relationships across difference and was essential for reconciliation.’ (p.58)

Drawing on the work of the missiologist Professor Andrew Walls, Groves also draws attention to the letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesus, he says, there was sharp division between those who would only eat with those who were circumcised and those who would not eat with those who were. ‘Both sides saw themselves as ‘orthodox’ and sought support either to suppress the other, or to divide. The choice seemed to be between no disagreement or agreeing to disagree and to put up a metaphorical wall between the two communities.’ (p.58) The letter to the Ephesians, however, ‘offers a glorious vision to the twin fallacies of forcing unity, or enforcing division’ (p.59) What we are offered in Ephesians 2:13-22 ‘is an uncomfortable and unsettling picture of an ongoing search for truth, rather than a fixed defence of established truth.’ (p.59)

This, for Groves, is what good disagreement is all about. ‘Good disagreement is a painful and complex journey towards the fullness of truth. It is the discerning afresh of the gospel in every culture and age.’ (p.60)

Groves next looks at the issue of the ‘values gap’ over issues of gender and sexuality between the younger generation and the Church identified by Professor Linda Woodhead. Groves declare that the purpose of the shared conversations has to be to address this values gap:

‘The proposed conversations on human sexuality in the Church of England are not something to be managed so that the church can get on with mission; a successful process will be one that enables parishes, dioceses and the Church of England as a whole to engage in depth with society, and establish identity that is both relevant and faithful to Scripture, tradition and reason. If it is to be successful, it will be a process that will be part of a refocussing on mission. The values gap identified by Woodhead cannot be maintained in any missional church.’ (p.62)

In Groves’s view, just as the evangelists to Dalits in India and women in Uganda were Dalits and Ugandan women so also ‘Christians who variously experience themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual trans, or queer, along with those who refuse such identity markers but experience attraction to people of the same gender, are the evangelists to church and world who are capable of challenging the values gap identified by Linda Woodhead’ (p.63) This is because:

‘Gay Christians are already counter cultural. Many speak of the intense difficulty of ‘coming out’ as a Christian in a society that regards their sexuality as something to be accepted, but their faith as something objectionable. They are the ideal people to ask and answer the question of Christian identity in contemporary society. It is these people who are the evangelists: presenting the gospel to the world.’ (p.63)

The next issue Groves looks at is Scripture. He notes that ‘The conversations within the Church of England will need to focus on shared study of the Scriptures and the Christian tradition’ (p.64) However, he further notes that the question then arises ‘as to which scriptures are to be studied’ (p.64) Some people, he says, ‘will want to focus on a limited number of verses that are specific to same sex activity, but the message of Paul is to focus on the core message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.’ (p.64)

Groves goes on to list thirteen verses which ‘a number of Christians who identify in some way as not being straight’ (p.64) had said resonated with them together with ‘one line to say why this verse was so important to them.’ (p.64) Three examples are:

‘A passage that has always meant a lot to me is Psalm 139. God made me, every facet, including my orientation, and therefore I struggle to see how God could have made mistakes. God loves me, even if some of his people don’t...’ (p.65)

‘It is finished.’ The knowledge that he has done his job, lived the life he was set to live and is now free from the mortal body. A cry of triumph is how I feel it.’ (p.65)

‘John 8.32, ‘Then you will know the truth and the truth will make you free’ came powerfully alive on one occasion when I found myself on the receiving end of others’ (and probably my own) subterfuge and manipulation.’ (p.66)

Groves declares that the choice of which Bible verses to focus on ‘indicates a wider issue of power in the conversation process. If the Church of England is serious in its affirmation of lesbian and gay Christians in its life, then they must be trusted in the design of the process, not just as the objects of study and the subjects of decisions.’ (p.66)

The next topic Groves considers is the relationship between local and global mission. He lists four ‘assumptions’ which have underlain the work of the Continuing Indaba process. These are:

- All mission is local mission – it takes place in a location and is about people and their relationship with one another and with God.
- All mission is global – the mission of the church in one place is the mission of the whole church.
- Local mission is liable to be ‘isolated, insular and introverted’ without the consciousness of the global.
- Global mission is liable to be ‘mission imposed on another’ unless it is rooted in the local. (pp.67-68)

According to Groves: ‘A clear vision of the relationship between local and global will be vital for bishops facing the anxiety of those who fear that the direction of travel for churches in their link dioceses is diametrically opposed to that favoured by groups within their own community. This is true whether the link diocese is in TEC, a Lutheran Church, or an African or Asian Church.’ (p.68)

Having looked at the topic of the relationship between the global and the local, Groves then addresses the topic of the apparent choice between losing Christian identity through cultural assimilation on the one hand and losing relevance to contemporary society as a result of fear and defensiveness on the other. He argues that this is a false choice.

He quotes the words of Jurgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God* ‘The Church which is the church of the crucified Christ cannot consist of an assembly of like persons who mutually affirm each other, but must be constituted of unlike persons.’ (p.70) and comments:

‘Such a church cannot be assimilated into culture and is resistant to fear. This is the aim and focus of shared conversations: to be the body of Christ as unlike persons proclaiming faith in Christ who breaks the walls that separate us.’ (p.70)

### **The Church of Scotland – the ‘Mixed Economy’ and ‘Constrained Difference.’**

The fourth essay consists of part of a report from the Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland which looks at the theological and historical basis for the proposed ‘mixed economy’ over sexuality

in the Church of Scotland which would see the church's traditional teaching about human sexuality being maintained whilst also allowing for the possibility of ministers being in Civil Partnerships.

The introduction to this material in the *Reader* notes that:

..the Church of England's historical and theological context is not the same as that of the Church of Scotland. But, in so far as the Anglican tradition is Reformed as well as Catholic, the aspects of church history explored in the paper below are not irrelevant to Anglican thought. One question for us to explore in our shared conversations is how far Anglicans can draw inspiration from these historical precedents and from the approach to difference and conflict taken by a sister church within these Isles. (p.73)

The Church of Scotland material begins by noting how at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church of Scotland allowed for a wider range of views about the teaching of Scripture on a range of topics such as the doctrine of creation, the role of the civil magistrate and the salvation of the un-evangelised. It then notes that in 1959 the Church of Scotland permitted the re-marriage of divorced people in church while stating that no minister would be forced to conduct such marriages against his conscience and that in 1966 and 1968 it permitted women to be ordained as Elders and Ministers, but with no specific provision for those opposed.

It then goes on to look at the teaching of John Calvin on Church unity and concludes that his teaching reminds us that 'it is mistaken and destructive for a Church to split over a non-fundamental matter of doctrine. It is destructive to raise a non-fundamental matter of doctrine to the status of a fundamental one, for this is precisely the act that causes the split in the first place.' (p.77)

The material next gives a series of existing examples of mixed economies in the Church of Scotland. The examples in gives concern admission to baptism and the practice of both infant and adult baptism, admission to Holy Communion, and the re-marriage of divorced people.

After that the material goes on to give two examples from the Early Church of what it calls 'constrained difference,' which it defines as 'a 'constrained' or limited departure from a norm based on a well-founded scriptural reasoning and not a 'free for all' state of relativism.' (p.81) The first example it gives is the Church of the first three centuries which was marked by huge variety constrained by an understanding that local churches needed to be indigenous, to be charitable and to be constrained by the 'canon of truth', that is 'an informal sense of the underlying structures of the faith and a witness to Jesus as Lord' (p.83) The second example is the work of St. Augustine in the fifth century. Drawing on the work of the historian Robert Markus it argues that his teaching points us to the truth that 'nothing threatens our future more than the current liking for easy polarisation and demonization of whatever we disagree with.' (p.85)

The material concludes by defending the proposal for a mixed economy as a means for maintaining the unity of the Church of Scotland while further reflection and deliberation take place:

The successful overture at the last General Assembly may be viewed as the latest expression of the modern church's breadth, at a time when further division would be particularly damaging to its wider work. Despite claims to the contrary, there is an honesty and integrity in this position in its recognition that the Church, whether national or worldwide, has never held the same position across time and space on all matters of faith and doctrine. The unity of the Church often needs to withstand deep disagreement and to provide safe space for honest and sometimes painful exchanges. All churches need on occasion to find ways of

maintaining the loyalty of dissenting groups and opinions. Indeed, one may reasonably argue that the draft Overture merely formalises a diversity that already holds de facto across our congregations and their ministers. In doing so, the Overture offers greater transparency and legal security than an uncomfortable 'don't ask, don't tell' policy.

The mixed economy in this form is admittedly an unstable position. We should recognise it as a temporary holding measure, although it is none the worse for that. In the light of experience and further discussion, the Church may wish to maintain a more unequivocal affirmation of its traditional position, seeing the proposed concession as an unwise yielding to secularist forces, as ethically unfruitful, and as lacking a mandate in the clear teaching of Scripture. Alternatively, the Church may be led to modify further its historic teaching on marriage and sexuality to recognise the validity of committed gay relationships, the contribution of gay couples to the life of our congregations and the calling of women and men to the ordained ministry irrespective of their sexual orientation and commitments. In the meantime, the provisions of the Overture will facilitate differing convictions, while constraining the departure from traditional teaching and practice, during an extended period of reflection and deliberation which can allow the wisdom and insight of a younger generation to emerge. (pp.86-87)

## **Bibliography**

The reader ends with a short bibliography consists of eight books intended to provide further resources for the discussion.

## **2. An Assessment of the Resources**

### ***Thinking through the process***

*Thinking through the process* has three great strengths.

1. It makes clear what it is hoped the shared conversations may achieve.
2. It explains clearly what the process will be.
3. It explains clearly what the resources are for the process.

However, from a traditional Evangelical point of view this material also has ten significant weaknesses.

Firstly, While it explains correctly in the first chapter that the shared conversations process builds on the work of the Pilling report, it fails to acknowledge that the approach taken and the conclusions reached by the majority report of the Pilling Group are controversial and have been not accepted by many in the Church of England who accept the traditional teaching of the Bible and the Church of England with regard to human sexuality. It also completely fails to mention the dissenting statement by the Bishop of Birkenhead that was published as part of the Pilling material.

All this matters because from a traditionalist point of view the failure to acknowledge that the majority Pilling report is controversial and has not been accepted by significant parts of the Church of England and the failure to even mention the existence of the dissenting statement by the Bishop Birkenhead makes it look as though those who have produced the resource material for the conversations have decided to simply ignore the traditionalist objections to the majority Pilling approach.

The material also fails to acknowledge that while the proposal for shared conversations was accepted by the House of Bishops and the General Synod the actual contents of the Pilling majority report were not. They were not rejected, but they were not accepted either. This means that arguments put forward by the Pilling majority report have no authority in the Church of England and this point should also have been made clear in the first chapter.

Secondly, although the Pilling majority report does not have authority in the Church of England there are other statements relating to sexuality that do have. The Church of England does not start with a clean slate when looking at matters of human sexuality in the context of the shared conversations. There are three key statements which define the current teaching of the Church of England with regard to human sexuality. These are the 'Higton Motion' passed by General Synod in 1987, the House of Bishops 1991 report *Issues in Human Sexuality* and Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference. In addition the Church of England's authoritative understanding of marriage as being a life-long exclusive relationship between one man and one woman is set out in Canon B.30 and in the marriage service in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

This being the case, it is a major shortcoming of the material for the shared conversations that no mention is made of these authoritative statements and no provision is made for the participants in the conversations to engage with them. It is difficult to see how there can be an informed conversation about where the Church of England's teaching and practice with regard to human sexuality, and therefore with regard to marriage as well, might go in the future without a proper understanding of the nature and rationale of its current teaching and practice. We have to start from where we are and then those who wish to do so have to try to make out a persuasive case for change.

Thirdly, there is a wider problem which is that there is no discussion of the limits to what those faithful to the teaching of the Church of England can rightly decide to believe, teach, or do. In order to have a theologically responsible discussion of where the Church of England should go in the future there needs to be a recognition of these limits.

Specifically, there needs to be a recognition that the Church of England is bound by what is said in Article XX of the *Thirty Nine Articles* and Canons A5 and C15. This means that in order to be consistent with its own declared position the Church of England can only rightly believe, teach, or do what is in agreement first of all with Scripture, but also in line with the teaching of the orthodox Fathers and Council and with the Church of England's historic formularies, *The Thirty Nine Articles*, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the 1662 Ordinal. Unfortunately there is no recognition in *Thinking through the process* that this is the case. The impression is therefore given that there are no limits to what the Church of England might rightly decide to do. We are left with a conversation that has no fixed parameters.

Fourthly, *Thinking through the process* correctly notes in chapter 3 that it is important for the Church to think about how it should engage in mission in the context of a society in which a broadly Christian world view cannot be assumed to be shared across our society. It also suggests, as we have seen, that the conversations need to explore whether missionary approaches based on affirming the changes in our culture around sexuality and those based on confronting such changes are necessarily contradictory. Unfortunately, those participating in the conversations are not given any help in thinking how to address this issue, or advice on where such help may be found.

Nothing in the resource material for the shared conversations provides the participants with any help or guidance about how to assess from a Christian perspective the changes that have taken place in British society in terms of beliefs and practices with regard to sexuality, or to think about

what might be the most appropriate missiological approach in the light of these changes. In the absence of such material it is difficult to know how the participants can have a useful conversation about these issues. The shared conversation resources provides quite a lot of material about how to interpret the Bible in relation to the issue of human sexuality and points to where more material can be found. Unfortunately it does not do the same on the issue of how to undertake mission in our society.

A further problem with chapter 3 is that the closing words of the chapter skew the conversation. Saying that 'Part of the conversation within the church today must be to explore whether different missionary responses to contemporary culture must be contradictory or could be complementary' leads the conversation towards the answer that the different missionary approaches could be complementary. In concrete terms this means that is pointing the conversations towards the conclusion that the Church of England should accept missionary approaches that affirm same-sex relationships as part of its missionary approach to contemporary British society. As we shall see this is part of wider problem with the *Thinking through the process* material. It purports to be neutral, but is in fact pointing the conversations in a particular direction.

Fifthly, the problem about lack of adequate resources for the conversations also arises in relation to the issue of how those in the Church of England should balance their call to mission in their local context and their responsibility to Anglicans elsewhere in the communion operating in other contexts. *Thinking through the process* introduces the issue in section b of chapter 4, but it does not give participants in the conversations any help in thinking how to address it in an informed fashion.

Section b also suggests that the Anglican Communion's Continuing Indaba process might have something teach the Church of England as it engages in the shared conversations. What it fails to alert the reader to, however, is the serious reservations that have been expressed about the Continuing Indaba approach by conservative Anglicans across the Communion who have seen this approach as pushing people in the direction of seeing differences over same-sex relationships as a secondary issue on which Anglicans can agree to disagree.

A final problem with section b is that it points the reader who wants to think further about the issues raised in the section to Philip Groves' essay in the *Reader* and, as I shall explain later, this essay does not actually help them to resolve these issues.

Sixthly, the problem of inadequate resources arises for a third time in relation to the issue of the limits of difference within the Church. The material in *Thinking through the process* set out the issue, but does not give guidance on how to resolve it and, as I shall go on to explain, the same is also true of the material from the Church of Scotland in the *Reader*. What is needed is some guidance about the criteria for deciding which things the Church can legitimately live with difference over and which things it cannot. The issue is briefly touched on by Ian Paul and Loveday Alexander in their contributions to the *Reader*, but more extensive material is required in order for the participants in the shared conversations to engage in a properly informed discussion.

*Thinking through the process* promises material from the *Faith and Order Commission* to help with this, but it is not clear when this will be available, which is a major problem given that the first round of the conversations in due to take place in April 2015, and of course we do not yet know what this material will say.

Section c of chapter 4 in which the issue of the limits of difference is raised also shows the same sort of bias that I have already identified in the material on mission. As noted above, the section declares that the paper from the Church of Scotland shows that in the past churches have managed to

accommodate major differences and then goes on to say ‘the question which both the Church of Scotland and the Church of England are facing now is whether different approaches to human sexuality, and to mission in a social context where sexual ethics are changing rapidly, lend themselves to similar handling.’ Setting out the issue in this way invites the answer ‘yes,’ once again pushing the reader of the material in a particular direction.

Seventhly, chapter 5, which looks at the issues of conscience and pastoral accommodation also raises a series of problems. To begin with it does not explain what it means when it says ‘Conscience should be respected when it leads someone to believe that they have no alternative but to hold a position or to act in a particular way.’ (p.19) What does ‘respect’ mean in this context? Does it simply mean respecting the fact that the person concerned is acting on the basis of his or her conscience or does it mean also mean being willing to make a space within the life of the Church for them to act in this way? The chapter seems to lead us in the latter direction. It links together the concepts of pastoral accommodation and respect for conscience, by seeming to suggest that pastoral accommodation is a way of making space for people to act according to their consciences. Thus it says that ‘pastoral accommodation was intended to maintain the tension between the authority of the church and the demands of conscience’ (p.20) and it suggests that the recommendation by the Pilling majority group that same-sex relationships might be marked in church is a way of making pastoral accommodation for ‘lesbian and gay people, who in conscience, seek to mark their relationship in the context of prayer and the family of the church’ (p.20)

There are two problems with linking pastoral accommodation and respect for conscience in this way.

a. It has nothing to do with the concept of pastoral accommodation as this was introduced to the Pilling group by Professor Oliver O’Donovan. As the penultimate paragraph on page 19 of *Thinking through the process* correctly notes, what Professor O’Donovan argued is that:

Pastoral accommodation is a way of recognising that not every situation resolves itself into a clear delineation between virtue and vice— people often find themselves caught up in circumstances which fall short of God’s intentions and have to make choices which minimise harm or which rescue as much as possible that is good. In such circumstances, the church’s pastoral obligations come into play, offering support, prayer and love. A pastoral accommodation is a way of making that pastoral offering without endorsing the circumstances through which the situation arose or giving moral approval to every element in a messy state of affairs. (p.19)

Classic examples of this kind of pastoral accommodation are provided by the issues of polygamy and divorce. Anglicans have always taught that both polygamy and divorce are wrong, but they have also recognised that they have an obligation to provide pastoral support for polygamists and people who are divorced and to help them to live in the best way possible in what are objectively morally wrong situations. However, this has not entailed accepting, or making space for, the conscientious beliefs of those who think that neither polygamy nor divorce are morally wrong.

b. Joining together pastoral accommodation and respect for conscience in this way would lead to a situation in which the Church would have to accommodate whatever people believed to be conscientiously right, a situation which would make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the Church of England to maintain a clear line on any issue of theology or morality.

It should also be noted that the final paragraph on page 19 is factually wrong. What it contains is not what Professor O’Donovan said to the Pilling Group. It is a version of what the majority report of the Pilling Group said in paragraph 388 of its report (not paragraph 276).

Eighthly, chapters 7 and 8 of *Thinking through the process* suggest that it does not matter what the actual outcome of the conversations process is in terms of whether or not it leads to a change in the Church of England's teaching and practice. What matters instead, the chapters suggest, is whether the process provides a model for disagreement that avoids 'acrimony and confrontation' (p.28), enables a 'greater degree of trust to build up between those who disagree' (p.25) and leads to those who are happy with the decision the Church of England eventually makes and are content to stay within it to relate well to those who feel 'disenfranchised, marginalised, or rejected' (p.25) or who choose to leave.

The reason this is significant is it means that the authorities in the Church of England who have produced the shared conversations material have effectively given up on trying to give guidance to the Church of England on the issue of human sexuality. They are prepared to let the conversations take their course and see what comes out of them, but they will not try to shape this outcome in any particular direction. Providing the process of reaching this outcome has been a good one, and providing the fallout from any decision is handled well, then they will be content.

The problem with this approach is that it is incompatible with the Church of England's existing official position on sexuality as set out in the statements which I cited in my second point above. If the Church of England really believes, as it says it does, that according to Scripture the only right place for sexual activity is within heterosexual marriage and if all other forms of sexual activity are contrary to God's will, then any position other than this would be wrong. Consequently those responsible for leading the Church of England should seek to ensure that the Church of England maintains its current position.

Being agnostic about what the eventual outcome of the conversations should be only makes sense if the Church of England is no longer sure that maintaining its current teaching and practice are in fact what faithfulness to Scripture requires. The Pilling majority report suggested that this is the position that the Church of England should take (which is the reason the Bishop of Birkenhead submitted a dissenting statement), but, as I have noted above, its argument has not been endorsed by either the House of Bishops or the General Synod.

Given that this is the case, I would argue that those who produced the resource material for the conversations lacked the necessary authority to move from the Church of England's existing authorised position on sexuality. They should therefore have produced material which made out the case for maintaining that position.

To put it simply, neutrality about the outcome of the conversations is not a neutral position. It is an unauthorised change in where the Church of England stands.

Ninthly, the proposed process for the conversations as set out in chapter nine of *Thinking through the process* allows less than a day and a half for each of the regional conversations, and given the constraints of the Synodical timetable this will almost certainly be true of the conversations that take place in General Synod as well. Anybody who has taken part in theological conversations will know that this is a ridiculous timetable. It is simply not possible to have serious in depth conversations about the range of topics proposed for the conversations in less than a day and a half.

This must therefore raise the question about the point of the exercise. How can this process possibly produce informed guidance as to the way forward for the Church of England, particularly given the lack of adequate resources already noted?

Tenthly, there are two problems with the list of questions in chapter 11.

a. None of the questions addresses the fundamental issue at the heart of the debate which is, 'Is there any reason to doubt that the Bible regards same-sex sexual activity as a sinful deviation for the pattern for sexuality established by God at creation?' Questions 3, 4 and 6 raise obliquely the question of what the Bible teaches, but this fundamental issue is never addressed.

b Questions 1-2 and 6-11 are questions for which the conversations material provides either inadequate resources or no resources at all. For example, question 2 asks 'More specifically, given that same sex marriages are now taking place, what should our pastoral and missional response be to married same sex couples who seek to be part of the life of our church locally.' (p.32) No resources are given to help answer this question.

### **A Reader: Writings to resource conversation**

#### **Ian Paul 'The Biblical Case for the 'Traditional' position.'**

Ian Paul's material is for the most part extremely helpful. It offers a generally reliable account of the evidence that same-sex sexual activity is incompatible with biblical teaching. However, I do have a few points on which I would question what Paul says and a couple of suggestions for additional material that would strengthen his argument.

First, what I would question.

It is not correct to say that Ezekiel 16:49 only condemns the people of Sodom because 'they did not help the poor and needy.' (p.6) However, Robert Gagnon, Richard Davidson and others have pointed out, Ezekiel 16:50 declares that the people of Sodom 'committed an abomination (a *toeba*) before me', language which is best interpreted in line with Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as referring to homosexual activity. Ezekiel thus condemns the people of Sodom both for their lack of care for the poor and needy *and* for seeking to have homosexual sex.<sup>1</sup>

It is also not correct to say that 'modern commentators are right to note that the primary offence was a violent breach of hospitality.' (p.6) There is nothing in Genesis 19 or elsewhere in Scripture to suggest this was their primary offence.

There is nothing that requires us to read Jude 7 as hinting at the idea of 'having sex with angels.' (p.6)

The most likely readings of Jude 7 are either that 'going after other flesh' means 'desiring homosexual sex' or the grammatically possible suggestion that it means that 'in the course of committing sexual immorality the men of Sodom inadvertently lusted after angels.'

Richard Hay's suggestion, quoted by Paul, that in Romans 1 homosexual activity 'is not a provocation of the wrath of God' (p.17) does not do justice to Romans 1:18. The reference in that verse to God's wrath being revealed against 'all ungodliness and wickedness of men' covers all the forms of wickedness highlighted in the following verses (including lesbian and gay sexual activity) and not simply humanity's initial turning away from God.

Second what I would add.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, pp.79-85, Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 2007, p. 162-164.

I would note that the rejection of homosexual cult prostitution in Deuteronomy 23:17-18 is further evidence for the Old Testament's witness against all forms of homosexual activity.

I would also note the point made by the American writer Michael Brown in his book *Can you be Gay and Christian?* That the reason that Bible has only a few explicit references to homosexuality is because the biblical writers presupposed heterosexuality as the norm. Brown gives the analogy of a new cookbook which features healthy desserts that don't contain sugar:

In the introduction to the book the author explains her reasons for avoiding sugar products, telling you that you will find sumptuous, sweet dessert recipes – but all without sugar. And so, throughout the rest of the book, the word *sugar* is not found a single time – not once! Would it be right to conclude that avoiding sugar was not important to the author? On the contrary, it was so important that every single recipe in the book makes no mention of sugar.

It is exactly the same when it comes to the Bible and homosexuality. There are a few strong very clear references to homosexual practice – every one of them decidedly negative – and then not a single reference to homosexual practice throughout the rest of the Bible. Was it because avoiding homosexual practice was not important to the authors of the Scriptures? To the contrary, the only relationships that were acceptable in God's sight or considered normal for society were heterosexual relationships, so homosexual practice was either irrelevant (because it had nothing to do with the God ordained relationships of marriage and family and society) or, if mentioned, explicitly condemned.<sup>2</sup>

Developing the point Brown goes on to say:

The Bible is a heterosexual book, and that is why it does not need to constantly speak against homosexual practice. It is heterosexual from beginning to end, and my heart truly goes out to 'gay Christians' trying to read the Bible as 'their book.' For them it cannot be read as it is; it must be adjusted, adapted, and changed to fit homosexual couples and their families. In short 'gay Christians' must read God-approved homosexuality into the biblical text since it simply isn't there.

And this is the pattern throughout the entire Bible in book after book.

- Every single reference to marriage in the entire Bible speaks of heterosexual unions without exception, to the point that a Hebrew idiom for marriage is for a man 'to take a wife.'
- Every warning to men about sexual purity presupposes heterosexuality, with the married man often warned not to lust after another woman.
- Every discussion about family order and structure speaks explicitly in heterosexual terms, referring to husbands and wives, fathers and mothers.
- Every law or instruction given to children presupposes heterosexuality, as children are urged to heed or obey or follow the counsel or example of their father and mother.
- Every parable. Illustration or metaphor having to do with marriage is presented in exclusively heterosexual terms.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?* Lake Mary: Front line, 2014,p.84 .

- In the Old Testament God depicts His relationship with Israel as that of a groom and a bride; in the New Testament the image shifts to the marital union of husband and wife as a picture of Christ and the Church.
- Since there was no such thing as in vitro fertilization and the like in biblical times, the only parents were heterosexual (it still takes a man and a woman to produce a child) and there is no hint of homosexual couples adopting children.

The Bible is a heterosexual book, and that is a simple, pervasive, undeniable fact that cannot be avoided, and, to repeat, this observation has nothing to do with a disputed passage, verse or word, it is a universal, all pervasive, completely transparent fact.<sup>3</sup>

### **Loveday Alexander : Homosexuality and the Bible: Reflections of a Biblical Scholar**

Loveday Alexander is entirely right to note that responsible biblical exegesis has to address the issue of the difference between the biblical world and our own and that we need to read Scripture with the help of reason and tradition, in dialogue with what God is doing in the world today and with attentiveness to the story of Jesus.

All this is true and helpful. However, where what she has to say is also highly problematic.

Firstly, the starting point of her argument is the gap between the biblical viewpoint which sees homosexual practice as sin and our current perception that 'our sexual identity is not about moral choice but about 'orientation.' (p.26)

As she sees it, for the biblical writers 'same-sex attraction is a moral disorder, a voluntary choice made by heterosexual people, and thus an expression of uncontrolled and often aggressive sexual desire.' (p.31) This view is the basis for the biblical condemnation of same-sexual activity. However, it is incompatible with our contemporary view of sexual orientation and therefore we can no longer accept the biblical rejection of such activity and have to find an alternative basis for our assessment of LGBT sexual relationships.

The problem with this argument is that the biblical texts that refer to homosexuality do not actually say that same-sex attraction is a voluntary choice and furthermore there is nothing in them that suggests that homosexual activity is 'an expression of uncontrolled and often aggressive sexual desire.' That is something that Alexander has read into the texts rather than out of them. It is true that St. Paul talks in Romans 1:27 about men being 'consumed with passion for one another', but there is nothing in these words to indicate that he thought that homosexual desire was inherently or uniquely uncontrolled or aggressive.

As Ian Paul argues, the biblical account of homosexuality begins with the fact that God has created human beings as male and female. As a result of the fact that human beings have turned away from God a minority of men and women have sexual desire for members of their own sex and on occasion these desires lead to same-sex activity. Both the desire and the activity are contrary to God's intention that sexual activity should only take place in the context of a marital relationship between one man and one woman.

There is nothing in this biblical picture that is contrary to what we know today about same-sex attraction and activity. There is still a huge debate about the precise cause, or causes, of same-sex

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp.88-89.

attraction. All we know for certain is that some men and women do feel either temporary or lifelong sexual desire for members of their own sex and sometimes they choose to act upon it. There is nothing in this that is contrary to the biblical picture.

Secondly, Alexander is wrong when she suggests that it is improper to use the word 'homosexual' in relation to the activity that is described by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10. What is described in these verses is precisely 'homosexual' activity in the sense of sexual activity between two people of the same sex. Furthermore, what the language used in these passages reveals is that St. Paul's objection to such activity is not rooted in perceptions of proper gender roles in first century Greco-Roman society, but in the law of God given in Leviticus. The reason that both men who bed other man (*arsenokoitai*) (1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10) and men who take the passive role in same sex activity (*malakoi*) (1 Corinthians 6:9) are doing wrong is because they are having sex with another man and this is something that Leviticus prohibits.

Thirdly, as Alexander rightly notes, we have to address the issues of which bits of the Old Testament law are binding on the Christian and which are not and how should understand the law in the light of the Gospel.

Fortunately, both of these issues have been very helpfully addressed by the late John Richardson in his little book *What God has made clean*.<sup>4</sup> In this book Richardson addresses the question of the continuing relevance of the Old Testament law for Christians in order to address the question of why Christians should continue to observe the Old Testament prohibition on homosexual activity when they no longer observe its prohibition on eating prawns.

He argues that in the Old Testament there are three types of laws, the cultic (which have to do with sacrifices, the sacrificial priesthood and the temple), the cultural, such as the food laws and circumcision (which serve as boundary markers distinguishing Israel as a distinct people belonging to God) and the moral law (such as the laws concerning murder and adultery) which have to do with morally right or wrong behaviour. The cultic laws have been fulfilled through the sacrificial death of Christ and the cultural laws have been replaced as boundary markers by baptism and union with Christ (which is why the food laws and circumcision are no longer a requirement for Christians). However, the moral laws still need to be observed, as the Sermon on the Mount makes clear, even though their observance is not the cause of our salvation and we are freed by Christ from the condemnation that follows from failing to obey them.

Having made these points he then asks: 'What can we say, then, about understanding and applying the Law in a Christian context? And what does this mean for the laws on prawns and the laws on homosexuality?'

He gives two answers to this question.

First, as Law these are both things to which we have died in Christ. We no longer live under either of these laws but under grace, no longer having our relationship with God defined by them and freed from the condemnation that breaking them would bring. Nevertheless as Scripture both these laws point to Christ and are fulfilled in him.

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<sup>4</sup> John Richardson, *What God Has Made Clean*, The Good Book Company, 2ed, 2012, Kindle edition.

Second, then, we must determine the application of these laws in the New Testament context by asking how they are fulfilled in Christ. Regarding food laws, the question has been answered already. But although it should be clear that we can eat prawns and still belong to the Covenant community of God's people, some may still ask why we are not also allowed to engage in homosexual acts. Admittedly they are condemned in the Old Testament, but can we not suggest that, as with food laws, the coming of Christ renders all sexual acts 'clean'?

In order to answer this, he says:

...we need to demonstrate in which category of the Law the pronouncements on homosexuality belong – cultic and cultural (and therefore superseded by Christ's work on our behalf and our union with him) or moral (and therefore both transcended by him and yet to be applied in our lives). And this means looking at the basic biblical attitude to sexuality.

Having reviewed the evidence, he concludes that in the New Testament sexual issues come into the category of moral law:

...there is no indication in the New Testament that sexuality per se belongs to any other category than the moral. There is no point at which sexual practices are analysed either from a cultic perspective (and hence as fulfilled in Christ's priestly ministry) or from a cultural one (and hence as part of the now-obsolete barrier between Jew and Gentile).

Where the New Testament does take up themes on sexuality from the Old Testament it generally assumes that what was wrong then is wrong now. If there is a difference, it consists in raising the standards of moral behaviour required of God's people. Thus concubinage, divorce and polygamy may have been tolerated once, but are tolerable no longer (1 Corinthians 7:26, Matthew 19:7-8, 1 Timothy 3:2).

Even more so than under the Old Covenant heterosexual marriage is consistently presented under the New Covenant as the proper context for sexual activity, outside of which is only adultery and fornication. The remedy to sexual sin may be speedy marriage (as suggested in 1 Corinthians 7:26) or rigorous abstinence (as demanded by the Sermon on the Mount – see Matthew 5:27-30), but there are no sexually active alternatives to marriage envisaged. Marriage is to be welcomed, fornication is to be fled from (1 Corinthians 6:18). These are the two options for the New Covenant people.

Fourthly, Alexander contends that it is significant that the Gospels contain no explicit teaching on same-sex relationships. She is right. It is significant, but its significance tells against the argument presented in her essay.

This is because, as traditionalist writers have pointed out, the fact that there are no recorded sayings of Jesus specifically relating to the issue of homosexuality can be perfectly satisfactorily explained because this was a non-issue in the Palestinian Judaism of Jesus' day. Same-sex activity was seen by

Palestinian Jews as contrary to creation, forbidden by the Torah and a characteristic vice of idolatrous Gentiles. There was therefore no need for Jesus to remind people that it was wrong. As Professor Robert Gagnon observes, he would have been 'preaching to the choir.'

However, if Jesus had supported same-sex relationships, then this would have caused enormous controversy for the reasons just given and there would be a record of this in the Gospels, just as there is a record of the ways in which he challenged the thinking of his contemporaries on other matters.

Furthermore, if Jesus did take this revolutionary approach, then there is a further question about why this apparently had no effect whatsoever on the Early Church which, as far the evidence goes, seems to have remained universally opposed to same-sex practice. When the Church moved out into the wider Greco-Roman world it said that homosexuality was wrong, just as Judaism had always done. We can see how the Early Church followed the teaching and practice of Jesus on a whole host of other matters<sup>5</sup> so why did they not follow him on this issue? The most plausible explanation was that there was nothing to follow.

The 'argument from silence' over homosexuality thus points strongly in the direction of Jesus taking the same negative attitude to homosexual practice as Palestinian Judaism and the Early Church.

However, we are not left simply with the argument from silence. We also know:

- That Jesus founded his sexual ethic on the fact that God created human beings as male and female and joined them together in marriage as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2 (Matthew 19:1-9, Mark 10:2-12).
- That Jesus did not reject the teaching of the Torah on sexual ethics, but rather intensified it by including desire as well as action and by taking a stricter line on divorce (Matthew 5:27-32).
- That the Gospels tell us that Jesus included *porneia* as one of those things that renders an individual unclean in the sight of God (Matthew 5:19, Mark 7:21). *Porneia* was a catch all term that included not only adultery, but also incest, homosexuality and bestiality. Obviously, Jesus himself probably did not use the actual term *porneia* because he would normally have spoken in Aramaic rather than Greek, but by using this term Matthew and Mark are testifying that Jesus regarded homosexuality as something that made people unclean before God.

These three known facts together do not seem to leave any space for Jesus to have approved homosexuality or even to have been neutral about the issue.

Furthermore, Gagnon's points that in a first century Jewish context Jesus' references to the judgment of Sodom (Matthew 10:14-15, Luke 10:210-12) would have been taken to include the fact that it was judged by God for homosexual vice and that Jesus's saying about not giving that which is

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999 and *Did St Paul Get Jesus Right?*, Oxford: Lion Books, 2010.

holy to dogs (Matthew 7:6) may include an intertextual echo of Deuteronomy 23:17-18 seem to be well made and provide additional evidence that Jesus accepted what the Old Testament had to say about God's judgment on homosexual practice.

Fifthly, Alexander is correct to point out that in terms of the structure of St. Paul's arguments the references to homosexuality in the Epistles are not essential to what St. Paul has to say. However, if one believes, as Christians have traditionally done, that the contents of Scripture are not there by accident, but because of the inspiration of God (see 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21) then it follows that the references to homosexual practice in the Epistles are there because God wanted them to be there and that he wants us to learn from them.

Sixthly, Alexander's argument that 'Paul doesn't condemn long-term, faithful same-sex relationships, for the simple reason that he doesn't know them: the homosexual activity he knows falls under the category *porneia* (bad sex) because it is either abusive (abuse within the family unit, including slave-rape) or commercially exploitative (prostitution)' doesn't work for four reasons.

- The first is that we cannot be sure that St. Paul did not know about the possibility of long-term faithful same-sex relationships. The ancient world certainly did know about the possibility of such relationships and as an educated Jew with the knowledge of the culture and literature of the Greco-Roman world St. Paul may have known about them too.
- The second is that there is nothing in the three passages in which St. Paul refers to same-sex relationships (Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10) which refers specifically to abusive or commercially exploitative same-sex relationships. Male and female same-sex relationships are described in general terms with no indication that a particular form of such relationships is being described.
- The third is that the argument ignores what we do know about the reasons why St. Paul rejected same-sex sexual relationships. There were two reasons. (a) Because they constituted a rejection of God's creation of human beings as male and female and intended to engage in sexual activity with members of the opposite sex (this is the argument in Romans 1:26-27). (b) Because they contravened the prohibition of same-sex sexual activity in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and as such also constituted a breach of the seventh commandment (this is the argument in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10).
- The fourth is that this means that St. Paul does in fact address the issue of faithful and stable same-sex relationships. This is because, from a Pauline perspective, even if they are long term and faithful, such relationships contravene the pattern laid down at creation and reinforced by the Old Testament law because they involve sexual activity between two members of the same sex. As Gagnon has argued, a good analogy here is incest. It is possible for there to be long term and faithful incestuous relationships, but these are forbidden in Scripture (Leviticus 18: 6-18, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5) because they contravene the pattern laid down at creation of marriage, and hence sexual relationships, taking place outside the existing family unit (see Genesis 2:24).

Seventhly, in her comments on the Gospels Alexander is wrong to suggest that Mark 3:31-35 shows that Jesus downplayed the importance of family ties. There is nothing in these verses to suggest that Jesus was downplaying the importance of family ties in terms of relationships between human

beings. The point that is being made is rather human family relationships cannot be determinative in terms of our relationship with Jesus. What matters in terms of our relationship with him is our obedience to God's will. (Mark 3:35)

Eighthly, while Alexander is right to note that in his comments on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 St. Paul emphasises the importance of sexual reciprocity and a willingness to serve one's spouse this does mean that he would have seen these as sufficient in themselves to make a marriage holy even if it was between two people of the same sex. This idea is unsustainable in view of what we know he believed about the sinfulness of same-sex relationships.

Ninthly, while it is true that St. Paul's preferred option in 1 Corinthians 7 is celibacy, as Tom Wright has argued this seems to be best explained by the social crisis caused by a shortage of grain in the Greek world at the time St Paul was writing. This is the 'present distress' referred to in 1 Corinthians 7:26 and this is the reason why St. Paul thinks it might best for the unmarried to remain as they are. As Wright says Paul is not writing about 'marriage in general' but rather giving 'urgent advice to a church pulled this way and that by conflicting social and personal pressures.'<sup>6</sup> This means that to say, As Alexander does, that St. Paul viewed marriage as 'a kind of pastoral accommodation for human sexual needs' exceeds the available evidence.

Furthermore, there is nothing in 1 Corinthians 7 to indicate that St Paul allowed for divorce even though he believed that divorce had been 'forbidden by the Lord.' It is true that in 1 Corinthians 7:12 St Paul distinguishes what he says about when divorce is permissible from what the Lord says, but the best explanation of this is not that St. Paul is deliberately contradicting Jesus (an idea that would run counter to the whole of the rest of St. Paul's theology), but that he is commenting on an issue on which Jesus had made no pronouncement, which is what a Christian should do if abandoned by an unbelieving spouse.

Tenthly, Alexander is wrong to say that St Paul's understanding of sexuality is 'derived from his own first century-cultural world.' Rather, St Paul was standing out against the Greco-Roman world of the first century with a view of sexual conduct based on creation and the teaching of Leviticus. His teaching is only 'without foundation' if you think the creation accounts and the moral commandments of the Levitical law are no longer theologically normative for us today.

Eleventhly, this means that the answer to her question as to whether we can 'construct a biblically-based theology that would allow LGBT people to engage in committed sexual relationships and find in them a source of grace' has to be 'no.' On the basis of Scripture we cannot say that same-sex sexual relationships are acceptable providing they are marked by fidelity, mutuality and commitment. They would still be wrong to the extent that they were sexual.

There would be no biblical objection to two people of the same sex who aspired to live together in a 'life of fidelity, mutuality and commitment.' The only problem would be if they had sex, because in the Bible the only place for sex is within a marriage between a man and a woman.

Twelfthly, Alexander is right to follow Luke Timothy Johnson in warning against both the danger of not defining the faith precisely enough and the danger of defining the faith too precisely. However,

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 1 Corinthians, London: SPCK, 2003, p.95.

she is wrong to implicitly suggest that we should not view the issue of same-sex relationships as an essential issue.

It is an essential issue for two reasons. First, because our fidelity to biblical teaching on this issue is a litmus test of whether we are willing to accept God's account of who we are and how we are meant to live in consequence or whether we insist on trying to live on the basis of a view of who we are and how we should live that simply reflects our own preferences. In the end it is a Creedal issue because it is an issue about whether we really believe in 'God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth' and are prepared to live his way. Second, because this is an issue to do with salvation. The Bible is clear that un-repentant sexual sin cuts people off from God in this life and in the world to come (see Matthew 5:27-30, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, Revelation 22:15).

### **Philip Groves 'A Search for Good Disagreement'**

Groves is correct when he argues that the Council of Jerusalem did not bring to an end the controversy about circumcision in the Early Church.

However, he is arguably wrong when he suggests that Galatians 2:12 indicates that St. James had begun to enforce a different line from that agreed at Jerusalem. Such an idea is difficult to square with the evidence of the acceptance of St. Paul's missionary activity by St. James in Acts 21:18-25. A better suggestion is that the people referred to in Galatians 2:12 were people from Jerusalem who were claiming St James' authority, but not acting in a way that he had approved.

Also, there is no good reason to accept Groves' argument that Galatians 2:10 is St. Paul's version of what was agreed at the Council of Jerusalem. Better suggestions are either that this verse refers to the outcome of an earlier visit of St Paul to Jerusalem or that St. Paul is not referring to the decree of the council at all since this was addressed only to the churches in 'Antioch, Syria and Cilicia' (Acts 15:23) and was not something that St. Paul either needed or wanted to mention in the context of his argument in Galatians<sup>7</sup>

The bigger issue, however, is that Groves has missed the significance of the Council of Jerusalem. This mattered, and is mentioned by St. Luke, not because it ended all controversy in the Church, but because it was the decisive point at which a decision was made in principle that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses in its entirety. This decision then came to be eventually accepted by the Church as a whole and has been the position of the Christian Church to the present day.

In a similar way the Great Councils of the Patristic period did not immediately bring about peace in the Church (sometimes in fact they led to more controversy), but they are regarded as authoritative (see Canon A5) because they were decisive points in which the Church re-affirmed its commitment

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<sup>7</sup> For the latter point see J B Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966, pp. 127-128.

to biblical teaching on a particular issue and which have provided reference points which have helped the Church to remain faithful to Scripture in the centuries since.

Groves preferred alternative seems to be to create structures for 'good disagreement' which seems to mean structures that will allow Christians who disagree to continue in conversation with each other while proclaiming Christ together in spite of their differences. The problem with this is that it simply parks the question of what it means to proclaim Christ faithfully. Either the Church says that all positions are valid (an approach which it is impossible to square with Scripture) or it has at some point to bring the conversation to an end and make a definitive decision about what things can be taught and practiced and which cannot.

Such decisions are not infallible, Councils may err (Article XXI). However, making such decisions through some form of conciliar process is the best mechanism we have for seeking to ensure that the Church remains as far as possible faithful to Scripture and therefore faithful to Christ.

The second argument that Groves puts forward is that 'disagreeing well' was at the heart of St Paul's missionary strategy. Unfortunately the evidence he puts forward does not support this conclusion.

- His suggestion that St. Paul 'refused to enforce uniformity across the churches he founded' (p.56) is difficult to square with the contents of his letters. In them he is constantly trying to bring about uniformity in the sense of a uniform obedience to the Apostolic message about Christ which he has been called to proclaim, what he calls in Romans 1:5 'the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations.'
- The four points he quotes from Roland Allen carry no implication of living with disagreement
- It is true that in his letters to the Corinthians St. Paul did not take sides in the disputes between different factions in Corinth to which he refers in 1 Corinthians 1:12, but his hope for the Corinthians was not that they would learn to disagree well but 'that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement.' (1 Corinthians 1:10). Also, while it is true that he expected the Corinthians to take responsibility for sorting out their own issues, he also gave them very clear instructions about what they should believe and how they should behave and in 2 Corinthians he gets very angry and upset when he thinks that the Corinthians are being led astray by a different message (see 2 Corinthians 11:1-13). What St Paul was looking for in Corinth as elsewhere was a united Church obedient to the Apostolic message. In our terms this means a united Church obedient to the teaching of the New Testament.
- There is nothing in Ephesians to suggest that there was a conflict about who would eat with whom or that the Ephesian church seemed to be faced with a choice between suppression of one side or permanent division. It is true that St. Paul stresses the importance of unity in the Epistle, but it is difficult if not impossible to re-construct the background to this emphasis in the detail that Groves suggests. Furthermore, there is nothing in Ephesians

about 'an ongoing search for truth, rather than a fixed defence of established truth.' What St. Paul is in fact hoping for is that the Ephesians will attain unity and stability in their faith and that this will protect them from those who would lead them astray. 'And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.' (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Groves is correct when he says that we have to 'discern the gospel afresh in every culture and age.' (p.60) However, it is important to note that this cannot mean discerning what the gospel is. This is something that has been declared once for all in the Prophetic and Apostolic witness contained in Scripture. What it means is discerning how the unchanging gospel addresses the particular issues raised in specific cultural and historical situations.

Groves is also correct to draw attention to the 'values gap' between the Church and the younger generation over the issue of sexuality, but it is less clear that he is correct when he suggests that Gay Christians are the ones that can help to address this values gap because 'It is these people who are the evangelists; presenting the gospel to the world.' (p.63) In the first place there is no empirical evidence that people with same-sex attraction are in fact the only or the most successful evangelists to our society. In the second place, if what Groves means by 'Gay Christians' is people who are in same-sex sexual relationships then it is difficult to see how they combine this with faithful witness to the gospel message since the two are incompatible.

What Groves fails to do is address the question as to why there is a values gap in the first place. The answer is because members of the younger generation either do not know about, or are unwilling to accept and live by, the traditional Christian teaching about human sexuality. To bridge this gap what we need are Christians, whether same-sex attracted or not, who can explain clearly and persuasively what the Bible teaches about human sexuality and why this makes sense and who can who make this teaching plausible and attractive by the way they live their own lives.

It is good that Groves insists that the shared conversations will need to 'focus on the shared study of the Scriptures and the Christian tradition', but it is not clear why thinks the focus should be on 'the core message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus' rather than those verses 'which are specific to same-sex activity.' (p.64) Surely the two need to be held together? The core message gives the context within which we need to consider the specific verses, but the verses themselves show us what it means to respond rightly to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the specific area of same-sex relationships.

It is also not clear what purpose is served simply by asking people which biblical verses resonate with them. What we have to do is to look as objectively and systematically and possible at the whole

sweep of the biblical witness in relation to human sexuality. Simply focusing on our favourite Bible verses is insufficient.

On the question of the relationship between local and global mission what Groves says is fine, but it is unclear how it helps us to address the specific issue with which the shared conversations are concerned. What is said here is too general to be really helpful. A more helpful discussion of the relationship between the local and the global can be found in the material on 'Diversity and Communion' in paragraphs 71-96 of the *Windsor Report* of 2004.

Finally, it is certainly true, as Groves quotes Jurgen Moltmann as saying, that the Church must consist of 'unlike persons.' (p.70). If the Church is faithful to its commission to make disciples of all kinds of people in every nation then it will necessarily consist of unlike people. However, consisting of unlike persons and accepting as legitimate the existence of a range of views on human sexuality are not the same thing. It is possible, and it is what we must hope for and work for, that there can be a Church of England which is full of unlike people who all accept what the Bible teaches about human sexuality and are willing to live it out in practice.

#### **The Church of Scotland – the 'Mixed Economy' and 'Constrained Difference.'**

The material from the Church of Scotland is interesting as far as it goes, but it is difficult to see what it tells us. If the debate we are currently having was about whether it is ever possible to live with any kind diversity and some were arguing that no diversity at all is possible then the material from the Church of Scotland would raise question marks about their position. It indicates that the Church has felt able to live with some degree of diversity in the past and continues to live with diversity in the present.

However, no one is arguing for the extreme position that there needs to be absolute uniformity about everything. What the debate in the Church of England is about is whether the diversity of the Church of England can rightly extend to including differences of theology and practice over same-sex relationships. The material from the Church of Scotland does not help with this issue because in spite of introducing the concept of 'constrained difference' it nowhere reflects on what the constraints on difference should be and whether or not a mixed economy over same-sex relationships falls within the scope of such constraints. It therefore does not contribute anything that helps the Church of England in its thinking.

Furthermore, for the Theological Forum to describe the proposed mixed economy in the Church of Scotland as an 'unstable position' is arguably excessively charitable. As numerous critics have pointed out, the Church of Scotland's current position is theologically incoherent. What the Overture accepted by the General Assembly in 2013 means is that on the one hand the Church of Scotland believes that sex should only take place within heterosexual marriage and that ordained ministers should live lives that are in accordance with the Church's teaching and yet it also accepts that it is right for local churches to appoint ministers who do not do so.

As the Church of Scotland minister Louis Kinsey put it in an open letter to the General Assembly:

‘There was just no theological basis for the counter-proposal [the Overture]. No biblical warrant for it. No logical coherency about it. It makes no intellectual sense. It caught your heart strings because it was made with an emotional plea instead of being accompanied by critical thought about the implications of what it proposed. The counter-proposal you agreed to says that the Church of Scotland affirms the Church’s historic and current doctrine and practice in relation to human sexuality; nonetheless [it] permit[s] those Kirk Sessions who wish to depart from that doctrine and practice to do so. So, the Church’s investigation of human sexuality for twenty years until Monday has said, on each and every occasion, that homosexual practice is contrary to God’s will in every place in which sexuality is mentioned in the bible. In short, sin. You affirmed this and agreed with it. But yet you also agreed to allow Kirk Sessions and individual congregations to disregard this, and to disobey God, and to do what God nowhere permits, if they wish to. How can the Church of Scotland’s General Assembly be so double-minded?

Can you see, with the greatest respect, how ludicrous that looks?’<sup>8</sup>

Any similar decision by the Church of England would be equally ludicrous and therefore the Church of Scotland’s approach is not an example to emulate, but rather a warning of what to avoid.

### **Bibliography**

The bibliography is good and balanced but there are two recent books that should be added. The first is the Church of England Evangelical Council Report *Studies on the Bible and same-sex relationships since 2003* (Gilead Books 2015). This is now the most up to date and detailed account of where the study of the biblical texts relating to same-sex relationships has go to.

The second is Ed Shaw’s book *The Plausibility Problem* (IVP 2015). This argues in detail that the biblical teaching on sexuality seems unreasonable is not because it is, but because of ‘missteps’ that the Church has taken in its understanding of the Christian life.

A final point to make about the Reader is that the weighting of the contents is biased. Only Ian Paul’s essay defends a conservative position, the other three depart from it in various ways. Surely it would have been better to have had a balanced reader with more material setting out the rationale for the Church of England’s existing position?

### **3. How Evangelicals should respond.**

First of all Evangelicals need to say loudly and clearly that, for the reasons explained above, the shared conversations are a deeply flawed process supported by deeply flawed resources. They are in fact an object lesson of how a church should not go about handling a serious theological issue.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://coffeewithlouis.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/an-open-letter-to-the-general-assembly-of-the-church-of-scotland-2013/>

Secondly, Evangelicals need to be aware that the shared conversations are only the 'warm up act.' It will be in the General Synod, probably in the session in February 2017, that a substantive debate will take place that could change the Church of England's theology and practice. Such a debate would be preceded by discussions in the College and House of Bishops so Evangelicals need to be ready for the lead in to the debate to begin as soon as the shared conversations have finished in the summer of 2016.

Thirdly, since it is clear that, whatever criticisms are offered, the shared conversations process is going to take place Evangelicals need to be ready to keep on making the following key points during the process

1. The position of the Church of England has not changed. The Church of England remains bound by the Higton Motion, *Issues in Human Sexuality* and Resolution 1.10 of Lambeth 1998 unless and until General Synod decides to the contrary. The burden of proof is on those who want to change the Church's position.
2. In considering its teaching and practice in relation to human sexuality the Church of England has to base its approach on the teaching of the theological authorities specified in Canons A5 and C15, namely the Bible, the teaching of the orthodox Fathers and Councils and the Historic Formularies of the Church of England (the *Thirty Nine Articles*, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the 1662 *Ordinal*). In particular it needs to bear in mind what is said in Article XX 'The Church hath power to decree Rites and Ceremonies, and authority in controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture that it may be repugnant to another.
3. The reason a gap has opened up between the Church of England and the belief and behaviour of many people in this country is not because the Church's teaching about sexuality has been shown to be wrong, but because increasing numbers of people have forgotten about God or are unwilling to live lives that are obedient to what God says.
4. In thinking about sexuality it is important not simply to focus on those biblical texts that directly address the issue of same-sex relationships, but to set those in the wider context of the fact that the Bible everywhere presumes a heterosexual norm for sex, marriage and family life on the basis of God's creation of human beings as male and female.
5. No one has yet succeeded in successfully challenging the fact that the Bible takes a universally negative view of same-sex sexual activity in all its forms, a truth acknowledged by many who would like the Church to change its position on sexuality.
6. It is important not to let our experience determine our reading of the Bible. Rather we must interpret our experience in the light of biblical teaching.

7. The question of sexual orientation is a red herring. There is no agreed account of the cause(s) of same-sex attraction, studies of sexual attraction indicate that in a large number of people who they are attracted to sexually is something fluid rather than fixed and even in the case of those who have a life -long attraction to those of their own sex whether they choose to act on this attraction remains an act of voluntary choice for which they are morally accountable.
8. The issue of human sexuality is not a secondary issue on which we can simply agree to disagree. First, this issue is a litmus test of whether we are willing to accept God's account of who we are and how we are meant to live in consequence or whether we insist on trying to live on the basis of a view of who we are and how we should live that simply reflects our own preferences. Second, this is an issue to do with salvation. The Bible is clear that unrepented sexual sin cuts people off from God in this life and in the world to come (see Matthew 5:27-30, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, Revelation 22:15).
9. The Church of England has a responsibility to take into account the effect that any decision that it makes will have on Christians in other parts of the world, particularly in those places where the Church is facing persecution.
10. It is not enough simply to say 'no' to same-sex relationships. The Church of England needs to take seriously the pastoral needs of those people who experience same-sex attraction and it needs to honour those who live lives of Christian holiness in the face of such attraction.

M B Davie 19.3.2015