

Grace and Disagreement – Shared Conversations on Scripture, Mission and Human Sexuality

Executive summary

Introduction

The resources to accompany the forthcoming shared conversations on sexuality across the Church of England have now been published. The purpose of the review 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.

What is in the resources?

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

The first part, *Thinking through the process*, is a short handbook consisting of thirteen chapters, which is intended to explain the purpose of the shared conversations, the resources that have been produced to support the conversations and how the conversations will take place.

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.

The essays are Ian Paul 'The Biblical Case for the 'Traditional' Position, Loveday Alexander 'Homosexuality and the Bible: Reflections of a Biblical Scholar,' Phil Groves 'A Search for Good Disagreement' and the Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland 'The Mixed Economy and 'Constrained Difference.'

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this material?

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.

1. It fails to acknowledge that the majority report from the Pilling group has been controversial and has not been accepted by the General Synod or the House of Bishops and it also ignores the Bishop of Birkenhead's dissenting statement.
2. It ignores the existing authoritative statements about sexuality accepted by the Church of England, the 1987 Highton motion, *Issues in Human Sexuality*, and Resolution 1.10 of Lambeth 1998.
3. It fails to acknowledge that the theology of the Church of England is bound by the authorities referred to in Canons A5 and C15, the Bible, the Fathers and the Church of England historic formularies.

4. It provides inadequate resources for thinking about how to undertake mission in contemporary British society.
5. It provides inadequate resources for thinking about 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.
6. It provides inadequate resources for thinking about the limits of difference within the Church.
7. It gives a problematic account of the issues of conscience and pastoral accommodation.
8. It suggests 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, a suggestion that only makes sense if the Church of England is no longer sure that maintaining its current teaching and practice are what faithfulness to Scripture requires.
9. The process for the conversations set out in *Thinking through the* process does not allow enough time to have serious in depth conversations about the range of topics the conversations are meant to cover.
10. The questions set out in chapter 11 are questions for which the conversations material provides either inadequate resources or no resources at all and they are also questions which do not address the key question of what the Bible teaches about the sinfulness of same-sex sexual activity.

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, some of what he says about Genesis 19, Ezekiel 16:49-50, Romans 1 and Jude 7 is questionable, and it would have been helpful if he had noted the significance of the rejection of homosexual cult prostitution in Deuteronomy 23:17-18 and the point made by the American writer Michael Brown that the reason that the biblical writers rarely feel the need to mention same-sex relationships is because they presuppose heterosexuality as the norm for sex, marriage and family relationships.

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. However, her argument that the biblical writers rejected same-sex sexual activity for reasons that are incompatible with our current understanding of homosexual orientation is unpersuasive, as is her contention that 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.'

Philip Groves 'A Search for Good Disagreement'

Philip Groves rightly notes that the Council of Jerusalem did not immediately end the controversy about the admission of Gentiles into the Church. He also rightly draws attention to the 'values gap' between the Church and contemporary British society, the need for Scripture to be at the heart of the shared conversations, the need to hold together both the local and the global dimensions in discussions about sexuality, and the importance of the Church consisting of 'unlike' people.

However, he fails to show either that the concept of ‘good disagreement’ has a biblical basis or why it offers the right way forward for the Church of England on the issue of human sexuality.

The Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland ‘The Mixed Economy and ‘Constrained Difference.’

The material from the Church of Scotland is interesting as far as it goes. 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, the current debate in the Church of England is not about whether or not there is room for diversity within the Church. What it 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.

Overall the weighting of the essays in the *Reader* 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?

The bibliography in the *Reader* is good as far as it goes but it would be helpful if it included the new CEEC report *Studies on the Bible and Same-Sex relationships since 2003* and Ed Shaw’s book *The Plausibility Problem*.

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.

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 Highton 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 29.3.2015