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Human Sexuality: Thinking It Through Biblically



not free to amend/replace it. Jesus affirms Genesis 1 and 2 (e.g. in Mark 10) and the Pauline corpus builds on Jesus and the Old Testament.

Secondly, it is impossible – they argue – to ignore the plain reading of Scriptures with regard to the morality of sexual relationships. In 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 Paul makes it clear that same-sex activity (along with a number of heterosexual practices) is incompatible with the call to Christian holiness.

Finally, there are a number of passages in the New Testament that make it clear that sexual sin can preclude us from being part of the kingdom of heaven. Whilst this is a challenging truth to receive, it makes it clear that the way we express our sexuality is an issue of fundamental importance.

Websites

www.eggscove.org.uk

www.livingout.org

www.ceec.info

Books

Sam Allberry, *Is God anti-gay? (Questions Christians Ask)*, (2013)

John Mark Comer, *Loveology* (2013)

Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard, *Good Disagreement*, (2015)

Sean Doherty, *The Only Way is Ethics, Part 1: Sex and Marriage*, (2015)

Ed. Andrew Goddard and Don Horrocks, *Resources for Church Leaders: Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, (2012)

Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing*, (2017)

Vaughan Roberts, *Talking Points: Transgender*, (2016)

Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem*, (2015)

Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* (2018)



12. Why can't evangelicals simply agree to disagree with each other on this?

In *'Good Disagreement'* (edited by Atherstone and Goddard), Tom Wright addresses the question of 'adiaphora' (differences that don't matter as against differences that do) with reference to two key passages.

Of Romans 14-15, Wright suggests that Paul implores his readers not to judge one another over matters of food because – as members of the Messianic community – these matters do not define the unity that is granted in Christ: *'The possibility of letting go of food laws and other markers of ethnic identity is tied to the understanding of the community of believers as the community of the new covenant in the Messiah'*. But this 'good disagreement' is preceded by Paul's restatement of a sexual ethic (chapter 13:13), over which he does not allow such variance of opinion.

In 1 Corinthians 8-10 Paul again tackles the question of food offered to idols and concludes that – since the 'gods' are not real (there being only one Lord and God), meat offered to them does not in fact belong to them (they don't exist) ... everything belongs to God. Hence his focus is on respect for the conscience of those who might struggle if they see Christians eating such meat. And once again (as in Romans) Paul's conclusion about food follows on from clear and non-negotiable teaching (in chapters 6 and 7) about morality, marriage, singleness etc. (prompted by the sexual misdemeanour referred to in chapter 5).

So our approach to food can be adiaphora – but our approach to sexual ethics cannot.

13. Can an orthodox view on sexuality be anything other than restrictive/bad news?

Yes – the call of Jesus is always good news. He calls us out of many different harmful behaviours into fullness of life – which for many involves celibacy, as it did for Him. Surely we do not go along with the myth, so prevalent in our culture, that human flourishing and fulfilment depends on being in a sexual relationship?

14. Why are (some) evangelicals seeing the issues surrounding human sexuality as so significant?

Evangelicals who hold to the inherited teaching of the Church believe it is crucial to do so for a number of reasons.

Firstly, because of the number of Scriptures that point to the givenness of male/female gender and sexuality. Scripture offers us an anthropology and we are

An invitation to biblical study

There are many significant challenges facing our society at this time – one of which is to chart a course through the questions around identity, gender and sexuality that result from the continuing liberalisation of contemporary culture.

Children and young people are growing up without an awareness of what the bible says about being human and how we are to flourish in our God given humanity. Christians in the workplace are feeling beleaguered by the apparent distance between their biblical understanding and the views and convictions of colleagues. Church leaders are being faced with ever more complex pastoral situations and struggling to offer leadership in the face of cultural currents that challenge inherited Christian ethical understanding.

All of this means that it is vitally important for local church congregations and their leaders to be engaging in a study of the bible on matters of identity, gender and sexuality. This short leaflet is a contribution to this study and offers a response to several specific questions that people are asking. It is not intended to be comprehensive or an in-depth study, rather a helpful discussion starter.

We commend this leaflet to you for study and discussion in small groups and other settings. Please feel free to copy it and circulate it within your church – or to download it from the CEEC (Church of England Evangelical Council) website*.

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* CEEC website www.ceec.info

The following questions/statements have been raised by people in local churches. They are important questions/statements and need to be thought through carefully. This leaflet offers a short biblical response to them and we hope and pray it will enable people to be built up in their faith and understanding.

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1. We all read Scripture from our own position – it does not speak ‘on its own’.

Yes we do read Scripture from our own position – but God speaks through Scripture to reshape us (Hebrews 4:12, ‘the word of God is living and active’). Respect for the fact that Scripture is God’s written word to us means reading it as objectively as possible using the appropriate historical, linguistic and literary tools and allowing what we discover to correct any faulty assumptions we initially had about what it teaches. To hold that Scripture cannot say anything to us that is not simply an echo of our own existing ideas is to refuse to allow God the freedom to educate, challenge and correct us through the texts that he created for that very purpose.

2. This is who I am. God made me this way – who am I to reject or change it?

God loves everyone, each of us and all of us equally. However, we are all fallen - and none of us is the way God originally intended us to be, in all sorts of ways. Therefore, we cannot simply look at the way we are now as a reliable guide to the way God originally intended us to be. Rather, we must look to Scripture which shows us the way to live.

At the same time it is important to be honest about our sexual feelings. The Church has sometimes been an environment in which gay/same-sex attracted people have felt they needed to hide their sexuality. This is not healthy and we welcome the greater openness we now have about sexuality. It is also important to note that we are not holding straight married people up as some kind of ideal. Our fallen nature impacts every marriage and all sexuality.

So, far from rejecting ourselves, we all need self-acceptance (because God loves us even in our most fallen moments), repentance (when we act in ways which fall short of God’s good plans for us) and a commitment to surrendering to Him how we will live our lives.

However, Wink’s argument is not convincing. He is correct in arguing that there is no biblical text which explicitly condemns and rules slavery out. But that is very far from saying that Bible sanctions it!

Within the New Testament church, the gospel brought a momentous shift in terms of how slaves were seen. For example, Paul makes it clear that in terms of status before God, there is no difference between slaves and free people: ‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28, NIV). Elsewhere, Paul says this: ‘Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord’s freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings’ (1 Corinthians 7:21-23).

Later, Paul writes to a slave-owner Philemon, whose slave Onesimus ran away and came to Paul, asking for him to be set free so that he could return and support Paul. This is because he regards Onesimus as far more than a slave: ‘Perhaps the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord’ (Philemon 15-16, NIV).

So it is quite true that the New Testament does not prohibit slave-owning or condemn slavery as an institution (although Paul does condemn ‘enslavers’ in 1 Tim 1:10). Yet it is wrong to suggest that the New Testament sanctions slavery. And if/when the Church or Church leaders have supported slavery during history then it has not been on the basis of good exegesis. Paul debunked the ‘rightness’ of slavery and sought freedom for slaves when the opportunity arose. But he never endorsed same-sex relationships. Thus slavery is not analogous to same-sex sexual relationships.

Similarly, the status of women changes significantly throughout the Bible, such that by the time of the New Testament Church Paul commends, appreciates and releases the ministry of women in the Churches for which he has a responsibility. However, there is no parallel trajectory or ‘movement’ within the Bible in regard to the exercise of same-sex sexual relationships.

9. Inclusivity is the Jesus way.

Nothing in the world should be more inclusive than the Christian church. The offer of God's love in Christ is made to all people regardless of age, race, class, gender and sexuality. We believe that the call of Jesus to every man, woman and child is 'Come as you are but don't stay as you are'. The call to discipleship to all (no exceptions) is to repent and believe the good news, to take up our cross and follow Him.

10. We must avoid schism – unity is the source of blessing.

The Bible allows for disagreements on certain issues. In Romans 14, Paul speaks about 'disputable matters' and calls on his readers to be convinced in their own mind what they think (Romans 14:5). But Paul also argues that there are some issues that are non-negotiable, where the gospel is at stake (e.g. in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, he reminds his readers of the 'matters of first importance' that he had earlier taught them and which stood at the heart of their gospel faith).

In 1 Corinthians 6:9 Paul says that immorality prevents us from inheriting the kingdom of God. He includes in his list of 'wrongdoers' those who practise various sexual immoralities including homosexuality. It appears that Paul does not allow us to have a different view about this.

Psalms 133 suggests that unity secures God's blessing. However, Scripture never suggests that unity is the sole goal or can replace a shared commitment to biblical truth. In Philippians 1:27, Paul offers a vision for the Church as those who are committed to both holiness and unity.

The problem with being asked to endorse or make provision for sexual relationships outside of male/female marriage is that unity is being placed ahead of a shared commitment to biblical truth as we have received it.

11. Slaves/women/ homosexuality... it's a right and inevitable trajectory of increasing freedom and justice.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink (who is in favour of same-sex relationships) admits that the Bible does rule out same-sex sexual intimacy. But he also maintains that the Bible sanctions slavery, which thankfully we now recognise as deeply evil and wrong. Wink therefore articulates an argument some have taken up: that it is quite right to move away from biblical teaching with regard to same-sex relationships, in the same way that we have moved away from biblical teaching on slavery.

3. Equality and justice demand recognition of non-heterosexual relationships.

Every individual is equal. Scripture teaches that all people are made in the image of God and sacrificially loved by Him. But Scripture also sets boundaries for the way we live, so the pursuit of equality does not always mean the church can endorse or bless specific behaviours.

So, one could argue that having legal recognition for same-sex relationships bears witness to the equality of all and offers protection to those who have chosen to share their lives with one another. This is a matter for the state and has been dealt with accordingly. But here we are not discussing legal protection but church provision, and the church must base its decisions on the biblical teaching on marriage and sexual relationships.

4. Evangelicals can't agree amongst themselves any more about these issues.

Evangelical organisations such as EA maintain a continuing position with evangelical thought over the years, along with the majority of evangelical scholars (c.f. the CEEC report *Studies on the Bible and Same-Sex Relationships since 2003* and, more briefly, Sam Allberry's *Is God Anti-Gay?*).

It is the case that a number of (well known) individual Evangelicals have changed their convictions regarding sexual ethics in recent years. However, the significant issue is not that they have changed their convictions, but whether they have been right to do so. The only way to test this is to compare what they now believe with the teaching of Scripture, and it is our conviction that in order to do so they have departed from a classic approach to Scripture.

It is because of this that the weight of conviction amongst UK Evangelicals is in favour of the Church maintaining its position on human sexuality.

5. We're going to lose all our young people if we don't keep up with the changing times and culture.

Organisations working with students (including student ministries and mission organisations) report a positive response from young people to traditional Christian ethics taught well.

It is incumbent upon growing evangelical churches to teach/nurture young people in all aspects of life and holiness, including sexuality. It is interesting to note that young people are often inspired by a countercultural 'call' – and we must not fear to teach a message that is against the flow of contemporary culture.

6. Mission demands that we change our 'out of date' position.

Jesus' example of mission showed love for, respect towards and acceptance of all. At the same time, He did not endorse all the actions/behaviours of those He welcomed.

The assumption in the 'mission demands it' statement is that people cannot hear/accept the gospel if we are felt to be 'exclusive' in our sexual ethics. The Church/Christian faith – we are told – will be rejected if we do not change our teaching/practice in this area to be more in step with today's culture.

The never changing vocation of the church is to be true to the gospel – even if it is countercultural or at odds with the political philosophy of the time. Jesus spoke of a kingdom which was perceived to be a threat to Rome, Paul preached the cross despite it being foolishness and an offence to many hearers. Luther challenged the Church to be countercultural and Christians around the world today are paying the price for standing against non-Christian philosophies, politics and prejudice. At these times and in these places the Church has grown and is still growing.

The mission given to the Church by the risen Christ is to 'make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19-20). What we learn from the New Testament is that in terms of sexual ethics such observance means sexual faithfulness within opposite-sex marriage and sexual abstinence outside it. It follows that the idea that mission demands that we permit/teach a different sexual ethic is self-contradictory. Mission that does not teach obedient discipleship simply is not genuine mission.

7. Scripture isn't clear on a number of issues regarding human sexuality.

On the matters addressed by Scripture it is very difficult to see any lack of clarity. So with regard to marriage: Genesis, the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Isaiah and Jeremiah), Jesus (Mt 19), Ephesians and Revelation all point to the unique complementarity of male/female in marriage as the only basis for sexual relations.

Some have suggested that faithful same-sex relationships were not known in (pre) biblical times and therefore the Bible is silent on this matter. This is not true: such relationships are acknowledged by Plato and others, and it is likely that Alexander the Great was in a same-sex relationship with Hephaestion, as was Pausanias with the poet Agathon.

As the Christian Church has consistently taught down the ages and across the world, the Bible makes it clear that God created human beings as male and female (Genesis 1:26-27) and he instituted marriage between a woman and a man (Genesis 2:24) as the sole legitimate context for sexual intercourse. It is for this reason that the Bible describes all forms of sexual activity outside opposite-sex marriage, whether between people of the opposite sex or people of the same sex, as sinful and to be avoided by God's people. There is nowhere in Scripture which suggests any alternative sexual ethic might be legitimate.

It is worth noting that a number of recognised scholars who support same-sex relationships agree that the Bible clearly presents what we now regard as the orthodox/traditional sexual ethic (e.g. Walter Wink, Dan O. Via, William Loader, Bernadette J. Brooten and Diarmaid MacCulloch) – their rejection of its clear teaching is based on their view of the nature/status of Scripture and not on any doubt about its clarity or orthodoxy.

8. Good disagreement demands mutual recognition.

There are some things about which disagreement is possible (c.f. Romans 14). However, over more fundamental things, disagreement within the Church is never 'good.' God's will for his people is that they should be 'in full accord and of one mind' (Philippians 2:2), accepting the truth God has revealed to us in Scripture and living it out both as individuals and as a Christian community. But because sin remains a reality even in the lives of baptised believers, disagreement occurs and we have to handle it as well as possible. This means treating everyone, regardless of their convictions or behaviour, with love and respect. It does not mean the Church giving recognition to beliefs and forms of behaviour that contradict biblical teaching. To do that would be to disagree with God, and this would be the ultimate form of 'bad disagreement.'

In September 2014, the EGGs Committee wrote the following after the publication of the Pilling Report (November 2013):

'We are concerned that the concept of 'good disagreement' might be(come) code for wanting to move the Church of England to a position where both the orthodox biblical position on sexuality and the revisionist alternative are viewed as equally acceptable. Whilst we may be comfortable supporting a process of 'good disagreement' (and theological discussion often demands this of us) we may not be able to endorse embodiments of 'good disagreement' if they legitimize non scriptural teaching/practice.'

Continued