

On why conservatives remain conservative

The argument of Jayne Ozanne and the fourth possibility she overlooks

In her article 'Bishops' Letters and the Case for the Defence – "Lunatic, Liar, or Lord"' posted on the *Via Media* website on 22 October 2018,¹ Jayne Ozanne refers to C S Lewis' famous argument in *Mere Christianity* that the evidence that we possess about what Jesus was like means that the only options we have are to say that he was a liar, say that he was a lunatic, or accept him as Lord. She then suggests that in a similar way there are only three possible explanations as to why conservative bishops refuse to accept the legitimacy of accepting an 'inclusive' reading of Scripture that affirms the legitimacy of same sex sexual relationships.

The three possibilities are, she says,

'(i) that they have either not heard or understood the fact that there are others who in all conscience believe that Holy Scripture can be read differently, and that their teaching is doing immeasurable harm.

(ii) that they do not respect those who have a different understanding of Scripture, and therefore feel able to blank their differing views because they do not believe they are Christian views, and that those who suffer do so because of their sinful desires

Or

(iii) that they are stubbornly sticking to their point of view because to do otherwise would mean having to admit that they are wrong and they would then need to recognise the immense damage they have inflicted on so many under their care.'²

Ozanne invites alternative possibilities, and there is surely a fourth: that there are bishops and other Christians who take a traditional view of sexual ethics not for the reasons given, but because they have examined the 'inclusive' readings of Scripture with care, and do not find them persuasive.³

A good illustration of why conservative scholars find the arguments put forward in support of an inclusive position unconvincing is provided by three articles supporting an inclusive approach published on the *Via Media* website earlier in October. None of these three pieces puts forward a convincing biblical case for changing the Church's traditional position that sexual intercourse should only take place between men and women in the context of marriage.

¹ Jayne Ozanne, 'Bishops' Letters and the Case for the Defence – "Lunatic, Liar, or Lord," *Via Media News*, at <https://viamedia.news/2018/10/22/bishops-letters-and-the-case-for-the-defence-lunatic-liar-or-lord/>

² It is not clear why Ozanne, puts forward these three explanations (with no supporting evidence). She seems to be engaging in what Lewis called 'Bulverism,' the tactic of discounting an opponent's argument by saying that it is determined by some factor other than the exercise of reason ('you only say this because you are young/old/male/female/ white/straight/ middle class/communist/capitalist' etc.). C S Lewis, 'Bulverism,' in C S Lewis, *Compelling Reason* (London: Fount, 1998) pp.17-21.

³ See, for example Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville Abingdon, 2001), Michael Brown, *Can you be Gay and Christian?* (Lake Forest: Front Line, 2014) and Ian Paul, *Same-Sex Unions – The Key Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Grove Books 2014).

David Gillett

The first article is by Bishop David Gillett.⁴ He makes three points.

- First, we should be cautious about suggesting that our way of reading Scripture is the only right way of reading it.
- Secondly, we should ‘allow for readings of the bible that respect LGBTI+ experience and how they are made in the image of God.’
- Thirdly, this means we should accept a reading of Genesis 2 which says that it affirms that God’s desire is for people to have the right companion for them, regardless of whether that person is of the opposite sex or of the same sex.

It is, of course, the case that we need to be open to the possibility that our reading of Scripture is mistaken or that it can also be read in some other way as the first point states. However, this does not mean that we should therefore simply accept any proposed reading of Scripture unless the use of our God given reason leads us to see that the proposed reading makes equal or better sense of the biblical text than the one that we currently hold.

In response to the second point, it needs to be noted that LGBTI+ experience is not monochrome. There are those people with same-sex attraction whose experience has led them to believe that same sex sexual relationships are in accordance with God’s will, but there are also those with same-sex attraction whose experience has led them to take the opposite position.⁵ This means that the testimony of people with same-sex attraction does not point us in an exclusively inclusive direction (a point which Gillett seems to miss).⁶

The third point, that Genesis 2 can be read as affirming same-sex relationships, is hard to maintain in the light of Genesis 1. It teaches that *because* God has created human beings in his image and likeness as male and female, *therefore* the woman is the right companion for the man (and vice versa) and God has created marriage as the social institution which gives expression to this fact.

David Atkinson

The second article is by Bishop David Atkinson.⁷ He declares, ‘I accept that whenever Scripture refers to same sex relationships it does so negatively.’ However, he then gives four reasons why he thinks that there can be permanent covenanted same-sex relationships that are blessed by God.

⁴ David Gillett, ‘Same Sex Marriage & Scripture: Affirming Evangelical Response (Part 1)’ at <https://viamedia.news/2018/10/16/same-sex-marriage-scripture-affirming-evangelical-response-part-1/>

⁵ See the material on the Living Out website at <http://www.livingout.org/>

⁶ It also needs to be noted that the fact that LGBTI+ people are made in the image of God points us in the opposite direction from the one in which Gillett wants us to go. As Jesus himself notes in his comments in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12, the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 teach us that the social institution which gives expression to the truth that God has created human beings in his image and likeness as male and female is heterosexual marriage. This is the force of the word ‘therefore’ in Genesis 2:24. It is because God has created his human creatures in a particular way that he has ordained marriage between a man and a woman as the social context for human sexual union and as the means of fulfilling the mandate to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1:28).

⁷ David Atkinson ‘Same Sex Marriage & Scripture: Affirming Evangelical Response (Part 2)’ at <https://viamedia.news/2018/10/17/same-sex-marriage-scripture-affirming-evangelical-response-part-2/>

First, he says 'I cannot accept the Levitical laws with their associated death penalty as a clear guide for Christian discipleship.' Here we have to distinguish two things. It is true that in the New Testament the death penalty for sexual offences as laid down in Leviticus is not enforced.⁸ However, this does not mean that the moral prohibition on these offences no longer applies.

On the contrary, as Ian Paul notes, Acts 15 tells us that when the Early Church debated what obligations should be laid upon Gentile converts, it decided under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that they needed to observe what was said in Leviticus about sexual holiness. As he notes, 'the four-fold prohibition set out in Acts 15:29 corresponds to the four categories of law that apply to resident aliens in Lev 17-18, including the prohibition on same-sex activity.'⁹ In addition the Greek word *arsenokoitai* used by St. Paul in his lists of practices which are off limits for Christians in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 corresponds 'to the Hebrew term *mishkav zakur* from Lev 18:22, which was used in rabbinical literature to refer to all forms of same-sex activity, including men in both 'active' and 'passive' roles, and women.'¹⁰ What this indicates is that according to the New Testament the laws on sexual behaviour in Leviticus (including those relating to same-sex activity) are still authoritative for Christian discipleship.

Secondly, he suggests 'that St Paul's references are most likely to be to the idolatrous promiscuity of the Gentile world of his day.' The problem with this suggestion is that, as we have just seen, St. Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 encompasses all forms of same-sex sexual activity, not just that performed in a particular context, or that involving promiscuity, and the same is true of his language in Romans 1:26-27. It is true that in Romans 1 Paul sees same-sex sexual activity as an outworking of Gentile idolatry; but for him it is not wrong for *that* reason, but because it is against God's law and against the way God created human beings to be (which is what he means by the terms 'natural' and 'unnatural' in Romans 1:26-27).

Thirdly, he appeals to the blessings pronounced by Jesus on the 'pure in heart' and on those who 'hunger and thirst for justice' in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:8 &6). Atkinson interprets 'pure in heart' as 'emotional sincerity' and argues that it covers those who have accepted their 'gay identity.' He sees hungering and thirsting for justice as applying to those wanting justice for those who have been 'oppressed and marginalized because of their sexual orientation.'

The problem with this appeal to the beatitudes is that it does not correspond with the message of Matthew 5. 'Pure in heart' denotes 'one who loves God with all his heart (Deuteronomy 6:5), with an undivided loyalty, and whose inward nature corresponds with his outward profession (cf Isaiah 29:13).'

¹¹ Those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' are those whose 'one desire' is 'for a relationship of obedience and trust with God. It is thus a personal aspiration, not a desire for social justice.'¹² Matthew 5:8 is therefore not concerned with accepting one's own 'sexual identity' and Matthew 5:6 is not about supporting people who are marginalised or oppressed because of their sexual orientation.

Fourthly, he argues that Jesus allows divorce 'in certain circumstances as the best way of making optimum moral sense of a less than ideal situation.' In a similar fashion a permanent covenanted same-sex relationship might be the best way of making moral sense of the situation of a 'Christian gay person.' The

⁸ In the New Testament the penalty for sin is still death (Romans 6:23), but death is seen in terms of exclusion from God's kingdom rather than execution.

⁹ Ian Paul, 'The Biblical Case for the 'Traditional' Position,' in *Grace and Disagreement: 2* (London: CHP, 2014), p.13

¹⁰ Paul. p.13.

¹¹ R T France, *Matthew* (Leicester & Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press/Eerdmans, 1985), p.110.

¹² France, p. 110.

problem with this argument is that while Jesus permits divorce in the sole case of adultery breaking the one flesh marital union (Matthew 5:32 and 19:9), he nowhere gives permission for a same-sex relationship, nor is such a relationship permitted anywhere else in the New Testament. In Scripture and in the subsequent tradition, the two alternatives are clear, heterosexual marriage, or sexual abstinence, with no 'third way' in between (see Matthew 19:1-12, and 1 Corinthians 7).

David Runcorn

The third article is by David Runcorn.¹³ His argument is that Evangelicals should adopt a 'Redemptive' or 'Christological' trajectory, a 'continuing unfolding' or a 'developing understanding' of 'what scripture teaches and calls us to across time' in the same way as they have already done in relation to the relationship between men and women and to the issue of slavery. As he sees it, we now have an approach on these two topics that goes beyond what the Bible itself says, but nevertheless continues a trajectory contained within the biblical material.

He himself concedes that there is a problem with this approach in that while on the other issues he mentions we 'already have positive hints in the New Testament the teaching about homosexuality is always negative.' However, he then qualifies this concession by saying that:

'Firstly, "homosexual" is not a biblical word. The word first appears in *any* English bible translation in the first edition of the new RSV in 1946. Those texts traditionally presumed to be teaching against homosexual relationships in every case describe subjugation, rape or violence, excessive lustful activity, patterns of coercive male dominance and a total disregard of acceptable norms of social, religious and sexual behaviour. So it is more accurate to say that these Bible texts condemn abusive sexual behaviour *of any kind*. They are not for applying to what is loving, faithful and committed.'

In response, the first point that needs to be made is that we should not confuse the term 'homosexual' (which is a nineteenth century invention) with that to which the term refers, which is to say a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex. While the term 'homosexual' is not used in English Bible translations until 1946, other words denoting the same phenomenon are. Thus the Wycliffite version of the Bible in the fourteenth century talks about 'thei that doon letcheri with men' in 1 Corinthians 6:9, *Tyndale's Bible* of 1525 has 'abusars of themselves with the mankynde,' the *Authorised Version* of 1611 has 'abusers of themselves with mankind' and the *Revised Version* of 1881 refers to 'abusers of themselves with men.' Simply saying that the use of term 'homosexual' is recent does not mean that awareness of, and rejection of, same-sex sexual activity is likewise recent.

When Runcorn says that the biblical texts seen as referring to homosexuality refer to activities involving: 'subjugation, rape or violence, excessive lustful activity, patterns of coercive male dominance and a total disregard of acceptable norms of social, religious and sexual behaviour', it turns out, on closer inspection, that in almost every case, they most likely don't. The sole text which fits Runcorn's description is the account of the attempted rape of the Levite by the men of Gibeah in Judges 19, but even in this text same-sex activity is not wrong *because* it involves rape; rather the intended rape is viewed as even more horrific because it involves same-sex activity.¹⁴

¹³ David Runcorn 'Same Sex Marriage & Scripture: Affirming Evangelical Response (Part 3)' at <https://viamedia.news/2018/10/18/same-sex-marriage-scripture-an-affirming-evangelical-response-part-3/>

¹⁴ For this point see Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) pp.94-96. The story of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19 is often seen as an account of attempted homosexual rape, but in fact the vocabulary used in the Old Testament to denote rape is missing. All the text actually says in 19:5 is

The reason why same-sex sexual activity is regarded in exclusively negative terms in the Bible is not because it involves activities which would be wrong even in the context of a male-female relationship, but because same-sex activity as such goes against the way God created human beings to be and is therefore prohibited by God's law.¹⁵ Runcorn is thus mistaken to say that these texts 'condemn abusive sexual behaviour of *any kind* 'and cannot be applied 'to what is loving, faithful and committed.' The texts reject same-sex activity because it is sexual activity between people of the same sex, and that rejection would therefore still apply even if the relationship in question is loving, faithful and committed.

Runcorn's argument would be greatly strengthened if he had shown that there is a trajectory in Scripture from a less accepting to a more accepting view of same-sex sexual activity. However, as the key text on the trajectory theory by William Webb shows, no such trajectory emerges. According to Webb, we can see in the Bible a counter-cultural movement towards the liberation of those who are enslaved and towards equality for women. However, there is no such trajectory with regard to homosexuality. On the contrary, what makes the biblical texts culturally distinctive is their universal and unqualified rejection of all forms of same-sex sexual activity.¹⁶

This means that while Runcorn is free to argue the case for the Church's acceptance of same-sex relationships, he cannot legitimately claim biblical support for this move.

Conclusion

These three pieces by Gillett, Atkinson and Runcorn therefore illustrate why conservatives find the arguments put forward in support of an inclusive reading of the Bible unconvincing. They, like the numerous other scholarly efforts made to support an inclusive position from the Bible over the last sixty years, fail to make a compelling case from scripture.

This means that it is not ignorance, or lack of respect for others, or unwillingness to admit that they have been wrong that underlie the views of conservative bishops and others on this subject. It is their desire to be faithful to scripture that leads them to continue to hold the Church's traditional position.

Very Revd Dr Justyn Terry

Revd Dr Chris Wright

Dr Martin Davie

that the men of Sodom want to have sex with ('know') Lot's two male visitors. For this point see Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) pp. 34-35.

¹⁵ For justification of this claim see the discussion of the biblical texts in Martin Davie, *Studies on the Bible and same-sex relationships since 2003* (Malton: Gilead Books, 2015).

¹⁶ William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001).