

The Human Sexuality Task Group



Toward a theology of same-sex relationships?

*Two views from the United Reformed Church
Human Sexuality Consultation,
September 2011.*

In 2007 the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church adopted a commitment on human sexuality. This commitment outlined three broad positions that people within the United Reformed Church uphold regarding same-sex relationships. The Church committed to remaining united despite our differences on this issue, recognised that all of the positions stated within the commitment are held with integrity within the life of the church, and committed the Church to continued conversation and dialogue on the topic.

The papers below were prepared by John Bradbury and Paul Stokes for a Consultation on Human Sexuality held at Westminster College, Cambridge, from 14-16 September 2011. They were invited by the United Reformed Church's Task Group on Human Sexuality to write the papers on the same theme, *Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships*, each from their own perspective. These papers, and the consultation as a whole, were an attempt at continuing the process of listening to one another within the life of the church on this difficult topic. Also included is a paper formed from an extract from a Church of Scotland report on human sexuality entitled *Sexual orientation: the lessons and limits of science*. This was available to members of the consultation, and is reproduced by kind permission of the Church of Scotland. These papers are now offered to the whole church as a resource to facilitate further reflection and conversation.

In offering the papers to a wider audience, they have been edited to make them less conversational. However, the reader is invited to receive them in a similar way to that employed at the Consultation. The speakers had discussed their approach and then exchanged texts a few days before they spoke, but they were not allowed to alter their words in any way to counter what the other was going to say. Each presentation was followed by a ten-minute silence, in order to allow the listeners to focus on what had been said without any distraction. There was then a period of dialogue between the two speakers, into which the participants gradually joined. After this there was a further hour of silence, to allow participants to reflect on all they had heard without the need to make any response. Only after that did discussion in group and plenary sessions take place.

The reader cannot follow this programme in detail, but the witness of the Consultation is that the value of the papers will be much increased if they are received in a spirit of reflection and prayer. It is with that intention that the task group now releases these papers to a wider audience in the church.

Toward a theology of same-sex relationships

John P. Bradbury

A note from the author

This paper was originally prepared for the Consultation on Human Sexuality that the United Reformed Church held in September 2011. At the consultation I delivered the paper, and then paper copies were distributed. I delivered only the main text, not the footnotes. The footnotes are there for those who want to see where my sources come from, or to follow lines of thought slightly further than are necessary in the main text. Please do not be put off by the lengthy footnotes. If you are the kind of person who gets driven mad by footnotes, just ignore them – you will get everything that you need to from the main text!

A gracious theology

“But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.” (Rom. 3: 21-25a)

These words of the Apostle Paul echo down through the centuries of the Church. Augustine heard and was shaped by them as he worked out what the collapse of the Roman empire around his ears meant. Luther heard them in the midst of a church greatly fallen into corruption and transformed the whole of Western Christianity. In the 20th century the great reformed theologians Karl Barth heard them and placed God’s work in Christ back in the centre of the life of the Church after the myth of human progress had been so cruelly exposed in the trenches of World War One. That God is God, and reaches out to us in God’s grace because we cannot, alone, reach out to God, stands at the centre of our faith.

It was Elizabeth Caswell’s address as Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church some years ago that called the Church back, yet again, to hear this message of grace. It was Malcolm Hanson, who, in hearing that gospel of grace proclaimed again, was powerfully struck by the reality that if God had, in God’s grace, called him, then God too, in God’s grace, had called those with whom he disagreed on matters of human sexuality. It is my deep conviction that in the Commitment on Human Sexuality, the United Reformed Church has indeed heard and responded to that gospel of grace – God’s free gift to us. God’s decision for us, not against us. It is my conviction that in doing so, we have begun to place this debate, which has done so much harm and damage, in its proper perspective – as something ultimately secondary, not primary. And therefore I hope that as conversations about same-sex relationships continue in the life of our Church, we will embody that grace, and seek not to “pass judgement on one another” (Rom. 14:13), as Paul implored the Roman Christians not to do, but to come together as friends, as those who “love one another with mutual affection” (Rom. 12:9), seeking to listen, understand, and to exercise that ministry of reconciliation that Christ has given us, because “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:6). It is in that spirit that I offer this paper on the theology of same-sex relationships. It is my conviction that we need to listen to one another attentively to hear what it is we are truly trying to say. To do that, however, requires that we attempt to speak attentively too, to try and state

our deep seated convictions on these matters in a way that enables this conversation to move on. I hope this paper may attempt something of that for the United Reformed Church.

Any theology of same-sex relationships must be rooted in the gospel of grace. Just as it was vital for the Roman Gentile Christians to learn that they could not simply reject the Judaism that was root of the vine that they had been engrafted onto [see Romans 11] (something the Church has had to learn yet again following the holocaust), so any theology of grace must follow the same logic. I cannot as a gay man, seeking to develop a theology of same-sex relationships, do anything that seeks to deny the faith and fundamental Christian identity of those with whom I am baptised into Christ, even when we profoundly disagree. For that would be to deny others a grace that I myself am dependent on. I am deeply concerned that there presently seem to be movements within the United Reformed Church doing just that: in the name of inclusiveness and welcome excluding those who in all conscience disagree. That is not the gospel of grace, and no theology of same sex relationships that ends up in that place will do – for it simply does not live out what it seeks to proclaim, however difficult and complicated that may be. And I defy anyone who has read Paul grappling with the difficulties that arise in the midst of a theology of grace, as he deals with the issue of the Jews and the Gentiles in Romans 9-11, to tell me that it is anything other than complex!

Clearing the decks: what are we talking about?

I want, first of all, to clear the decks of a few things that often one finds lying around as soon as one begins to think about same-sex relationships. Firstly, I want us to think about what we are speaking of when we talk of same-sex relationships. Whilst the language gets used in so many different ways, and however I use it will probably upset someone, we very quickly move to speaking about 'homosexuality' and 'homosexuals', and the more informal terms 'gay' and 'lesbian', and sometimes 'queer'¹. It's worth noting that the word 'gay' is now often used for both men and women, and is frequently claimed by women very happily. It is the term I will generally use in this paper. But what is it to be gay? What is it to be a gay person? And what, then, is a gay relationship – or, in the terms we've been given for these papers, a same-sex relationship?

As you walk down a road where do you find your eyes roaming to? Who is it that you find instinctively attractive, finding yourself looking at before you've really realised that you are? Who is it that you find yourself drawn to, revelling in their company, enjoying them that little bit more than others? Who is it that you find yourself drawn to in the sense of the person who complements you such that you become more fully you with them, than you are on your own? Who is it with whom you end up being more than the sum of your individual parts? Being attracted to someone is a complicated and many layered thing – from the immediately physical thing of finding someone highly sexually attractive, to someone who is a true soul-mate. And those things hopefully for most people come together in one other person – though of course life is not always as straight forward as that, as the vast literature inspired by unrequited love and the number of broken marriages testify. For most people, this kind of relating will happen with people of one gender. Thus, for most people, they find these experiences with others happen with those of the opposite sex to themselves, and yet for a small minority (and one can play the numbers game forever, but perhaps about 5% of men, and 2-3% of women²) they experience this as happening to them with people of

¹ The term 'Queer' has developed an entirely mad life of its own that I don't wish to be detained by. For an overview of the contemporary state of 'Queer Theory' and its applications see: Giffney, Norren and O'Rourke, Michael (Eds.) (2009), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, Farnham/Burlington, Ashgate.

² See: Johnson, W.S. (2006), *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law and Politics*, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, Eerdmans pp. 22-25, for an overview of possible readings of the statistics. It is worth noting, however, that generally speaking 90% of the population define themselves as 'heterosexual', 10% defining themselves as something else (which is not the same thing as defining themselves a 'homosexual', but does suggest that the standard category of 'heterosexual' does not fit 10% of people).

the same sex as themselves. We are talking about people with a whole range of physical and emotional responses to other people. For this reason, I quite like the definition used by David McCarthy, which is: “gay men and lesbians are persons who encounter the other (and thus discover themselves) in relations to persons of the same sex”.³ Whilst yes, I experience sexual desire and arousal through other men, but far beyond that, that exciting, painful, exquisite, terrifying, wonderful experience of beginning to fall in love, a process in which we can both find and sometimes lose ourselves, too, is something that happens to me with other men. And for some women that happens with other women, and for some folk, that happens with either men or women. For some, it is those of the same sex as themselves who cause them to say, as the lover in the Song of Songs:

Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land (Song of Solomon 2: 10-12).

And debates rage about what causes some people to be gay or not.⁴ That does not stop, however, the classic nature/nurture debate carrying on.⁵ Alongside of this runs a different debate within the world of social science. Some social-scientists tell us there is nothing at all innate to human sexuality but it is a vast web of cultural constructions – so, whilst there are sex acts between people, there are no such things as innate ‘sexualities’ – they are mere cultural labels that are used.⁶ This is what is termed a ‘cultural construction’.⁷ They point out that the term homosexuality, and its later counterpart, heterosexuality, only enter the language late in the nineteenth century.⁸ Other social scientists take the view that there is an intrinsic sexual orientation that has always been present within human societies throughout time and geographical space even though the meanings attached to this will change.⁹

³ McCarthy, D.M. (2002), *The Relationship of Bodies* In Rogers Jr., E.F. ed. *Theology and Sexuality: classic and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 212-213.

⁴ For the most comprehensive and accessible account of the state of scientific research that I can find see: Weill, C.L. (2009), *Nature's Choice: What Science Reveals About the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation*, New York/Abingdon, Routledge. Also interesting is the fact that in the animal world same-sex activity has been noted in over 450 different species (Hird, M.J. (2009), *Biologically Queer* in: Giffney & O'Rourke: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, p.349.)

⁵ For a brief description of this debate see: Naphy, W. (2006), *Born to be Gay: a history of homosexuality*, Stroud, Tempus, pp. 7ff.

⁶ For a brief description of this debate see: Naphy, *Born to be Gay*, pp.9ff.

⁷ Much of this originates in the work of Foucault (Foucault, M. (1978), *The Will to knowledge: The History of Sexuality:1*, London, Penguin) who charts the ways in which sex has transformed its meaning to demonstrate the lack of a fixed notion of what sexuality might ‘mean’. It is a line taken up in major works such as Greenberg, D.F. (1988), *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, and Halperin, D.M. (1990), *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: and other essays on Greek love*, New York/London, Routledge.

⁸ See: Foucault, M. (1978), *The Will to knowledge: The History of Sexuality:1*, London, Penguin, pp.43ff. for an overview of the move from the idea that there were certain acts that men performed with other men which were labelled ‘sodomy’, to the idea that there was such a thing as a homosexual ‘person’ i.e. someone whose primary identity could be labelled in terms of their sexuality. Halperin (*One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p.15) dates the introduction of the term ‘homosexuality’ (which arrived in the English language before its counterpart ‘heterosexuality’) to 1892.

⁹ An example of this would be John Boswell. His work presumes a reasonably stable thing which is a sexual orientation, and hence he can speak of ‘Gay people’ as a distinct and observable category. See: Boswell, J. (1980), *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. For a wide ranging overview of the history of ‘homosexuality’ across a wide ranging number of cultures and throughout thousands of years of human history see Naphy, W. (2006), *Born to be Gay: a history of homosexuality*, Stroud, Tempus.

I could go on about all of this for a long while. Pretty much all natural scientists, medics, psychologists and social scientists do agree, however, that it is certainly no simple choice. However, arguments that run along the basic lines that 'it's natural and therefore must be OK', are just plain daft. All sorts of things are 'natural', but not OK; one could list a range of things from paedophilia to Tsunamis. The Church and Christian theology must, following our convictions about God being creator and the work of the Spirit which 'blows where it wills', take very seriously knowledge which comes from outside the immediate theological realm (and we have historically got ourselves into great trouble when we have not!), but that must be no substitute for good, solid theological thinking in its own terms. That is why I have handled this material here as part of clearing the decks.

Clearing the decks: scriptural prohibitions?

Another thing I want to dispose of as quickly as possible is the idea that scripture speaks directly of same-sex relationships in the way in which I have defined being gay as a sexual and emotional attraction to another person of the same sex. I will take the very briefest canter through the short number of texts that do deal with same-sex sexual activity, most of which clearly are speaking of anal penetration between two men. What I think we can take with us from our discussion of the nature of sexuality that we've engaged with above, is that different cultures place very different meanings onto sex acts. Why something is condemned depends significantly on what it is taken to mean – and that does indeed vary greatly across different times and cultures.

Turning to the Old Testament,¹⁰ the key relevant texts here are the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20: 13 ("You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (18:22) and, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (20:13)). It is fairly clear and generally agreed that this is about penetrative anal sex between two men. The interesting question is what is at stake here and why it is forbidden. There seem to be three basic issues, firstly the general prohibitions against sex that is not for the purposes of procreation;¹¹ secondly, the prohibition of anal penetration between two men marks out Israel from neighbouring cultures; it is a marker of separation and identity. Closely linked with this is the fact that it is about purity. Falling in the midst of the holiness code, it is about ritual purity which would be understood to be defiled by such acts.¹² Thirdly, this text can only be understood in the light of distinctions between the genders in a highly patriarchal society. For a man to be penetrated was to make him into a woman, thus undermining masculine superiority, and was therefore something which was an abomination to the received order of gender relations.¹³ We must also note, with Philip Budd, regarding the strong term 'abomination' that "...the use of this text as an argument against homosexual relations today would necessitate, in the interests of hermeneutical consistency, a similar attitude to the issues raised in e.g. Deut. 14:3-8; 22:5..."¹⁴ These

¹⁰ I deal only with the texts traditionally considered to be prohibitive of same-sex relations. There are of course texts that have been used to suggest homoerotic relationships within the Old Testament, most notably the David and Jonathan narratives. Whilst one cannot rule out such a relationship, I'm personally far from convinced that one can legitimately understand this relationship as definitively sexual in nature. For a good outline of the current discussion of these texts and an interesting account which suggests the historical unlikelihood of such a relationship, whilst being open to so-called 'queer' readings of these narratives, see: Heacock, A. (2011), *Jonathan Loved David: Manly Love in the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Sex*, Sheffield, Sheffield Phoenix Press.

¹¹ Budd, P.J. (1996), *Leviticus*, Grand Rapids, Marshall Pickering. p.269. For an account of the centrality of procreation in Jewish sexual ethics in the period, see: Naphy, W. (2006), *Born to be Gay: a history of homosexuality*, Stroud, Tempus. p.33ff.

¹² Grabbe, L.L. (1993), *Leviticus*, Sheffield, JSOT Press. p.79, makes clear the case for this being about identity. For an effective account of the relationship of the prohibition to purity see Dan Via in: Via, Dan O. and Gagnon, Robert A. J. (2003), *Homosexuality and the Bible: two views*, Minneapolis, Fortress. pp.4-9.

¹³ See Via, in: Via, Dan O. and Gagnon, Robert A. J., *Homosexuality and the Bible*. pp.4-9; Johnson, A *Time to Embrace*. pp.124-129; Moore OP, G. (2003), *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality*, London, New York, Continuum. pp.74-81.

¹⁴ Budd, *Leviticus*. p.269

abominations include eating forbidden animals with cloven hooves and men or women wearing clothing traditionally belonging to the other. These concerns also underlay the significance of the same-sex activity that takes place in the troubling story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 (and its parallel in Judges 19:22-25). We must not forget that this is male rape which was not tolerated in any of the societies surrounding Israel, even those that tolerated some form of same-sex activity. This serves to emphasise the general vice of Sodom. It is, of course, the issue of hospitality and of general corruption and depravity which are the vices primarily concerned in the story as a whole.¹⁵

Turning to the New Testament the key text is clearly the opening chapter of Romans. Here, we need to think carefully both about Greek and Roman sexual practices, the context into which Paul was writing, and also the broader sweep of Paul's argument. The opening chapters of Paul's letter offer a broad and sweeping condemnation of humanity as it is apart from God. The Gentiles are not without excuse because they can see the power of God through creation (Rom. 1:20-21) but none the less have been idolatrous. 'Therefore', says Paul, God has 'given them up to' vice, among which is the fact that 'Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men, and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error' (Rom. 1:26-27). Alongside this, the Gentiles have been filled with "every kind of wickedness" – and a classic list of evil acts and characteristics are listed – classic in the sense of this is not an unusual list for a Jew to accuse Gentiles of. Paul then goes on to be equally condemnatory of those "under the law"¹⁶, turning his sights to the Jewish community and its shortcomings. All humanity, Jew or Gentile, stands condemned apart from justification in Christ. What we must note is that in Paul's view this vice is "the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it."¹⁷ Equally interesting is the particular word for 'passion' used, which has the connotations in Greek of a kind of madness. Robert Jewett comments that "the term includes disreputable, erotic passions for Paul, not the broader philosophical sense of emotions in general."¹⁸

To fully understand what is at stake here, we need to understand what Paul is talking about in the Greek and Roman contexts. Once again, in this context there is no such thing as 'homosexuality' understood as an orientation of sexual and emotional desire. Rather, there are again certain 'sex acts'. In Greek culture pederasty was a often highly regarded form of sex activity; a man having an adolescent boy as a sexual partner,¹⁹ and this continued into Roman society. In Roman society, the protection of the honour of male citizens was central to ideas of acceptability. It was acceptable for a male citizen to penetrate another man, but not be penetrated (in part, again, based on the inferiority of women within the culture; it was unacceptable for a man to act as a woman). It was perfectly acceptable to penetrate an adolescent boy, or someone your social inferior, particularly a slave.²⁰ Slaves were to be sexually available to their masters.²¹ Whilst there were cases of men who

¹⁵ Gordon Wenham notes that it is the general sin and corruption of Sodom is what is recalled elsewhere in scripture: Isa. 1:9; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Amos 4:11; Deut. 29:23; 32:32. Ezk. 16:46-47, Lam. 4:6, Isa 13:9; Jer. 49:18; Zeph. 2:9. Wenham, G. (1994), *Genesis 16-50: Work Biblical Commentary 2*, Dallas, Word Books. pp.32-65. Arnold (Arnold, B.T. (2009), *Genesis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. pp.184-87), McKeown (McKeown (2008), *Genesis*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans. pp.106-09) and Brueggemann (Brueggemann, W. (1982), *Genesis*, Atlanta, John Knox Press. pp.164-67), all emphasise the issues of hospitality and general disorder and vice as the essential motif in the story. For general discussion of Genesis 19 with regard to matters of same-sex relationships see: Moore OP, *A Question of Truth*. pp.69-73, 82-85.

¹⁶ Philip Esler has recently proposed that the letter to the Romans is fundamentally about divisions within the Roman Christian community between Jews and Gentiles, which explains the polemical condemnation of both in the early chapters before Paul goes on to root the identity of all Christians in Christ as a means of seeking the unity of the Roman communities. See: Esler, P.F. (2003), *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press.

¹⁷ Käsemann, quoted in Jewett, R. (2007), *Romans*, Minneapolis, Fortress. p.172.

¹⁸ Jewett, *Romans*. p.181.

¹⁹ See: Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*. pp.141-151; Naphy, *Born to be Gay*. pp.50-57; and Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. pp.29-38 for extended discussion of same-sex relationships in classical Greek culture.

²⁰ See: Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*. pp.152-160; Naphy, *Born to be Gay*. p.57ff.; and Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. pp.61-90 for further detail on Roman same-sex activity.

predominantly or exclusively had sex only with other men, there was no understanding or comprehension of a same-sex relationship in the terms that I set out above. There was also a religious element to same-sex activity between men, hence the institution of male temple prostitution. This of course led to links between same-sex activities and idolatry. Sex between men, then, was frequently about what today we would term paedophilia, or the rape of slaves, or the subjugation of social inferiors, or male prostitution (often with men enslaved into prostitution).

The other two New Testament passages that directly concern themselves with same-sex acts are 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Whilst debates have raged about the precise definitions of *malakos* and *arsenkoitai*,²² it seems clear to me that these do indeed relate to anal penetration between two men, but would hold exactly the same connotations as we have discussed in terms of Greek and Roman culture above.

So, to summarise, whilst both the Old and New Testaments do, on these very few occasions, speak about same-sex activity (usually anal penetration) they all do so with reference to cultural contexts which make clear that what is being condemned, and the reasons for the condemnation are radically apart from same-sex relationships as we have defined them. Either they rest on understandings of gender relationships that we no longer consider to reflect the content of the gospel witness as a whole, or on forms of holiness and purity that are primarily about cultural and cultic separation. This notion was radically challenged in the Early Church as it becomes clear that God had indeed engrafted Gentiles into the Church such that racial, cultic separation is no longer the mark of holiness, but rather the way in which we exist together as the Body of Christ under the headship of Christ. There is a strand running through this of the rejection of sex other than for procreation, something that the Church no longer considers relevant (apart, perhaps, from the Roman Catholic Church that continues its prohibition of contraception²³). Others are referring to social practices that are exploitative and repressive. St. Paul's presumption is that same-sex behaviour is also related to idolatry, something which I would suggest the existence of many faithful Christian gay people suggests is simply not always the case. These texts cannot be the biblical starting point for a discussion of a theology of same-sex relationships in the 21st century. We need, rather, to turn elsewhere.²⁴

Being human in relationship

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone.'" (Gen. 2:18)

Christian identity is never an individualistic identity. The creation accounts offered in Genesis 1 and 2 speak of humanity as a whole, and of human community as being central to what it is to be human. "'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'" (Gen. 1:26) says God, and so God

²¹It has been suggested that the reason Paul could expect obvious agreement on the nature of the unacceptable nature of same-sex relationships is because the Christian communities in Rome were largely made up of socially inferior people, immigrants from Greek speaking parts of the Empire, immigrant Jews, or slaves – precisely those whom the culture found it permissible for a Roman citizen to penetrate, sometimes at force. This is noted by Robert Jewett in: Jewett, R. (2007), *Romans*, Minneapolis, Fortress. p.181.

²² In the English roughly 'soft' men, referring to passive men who are penetrated, and 'men who have sex with men', probably the more active partner.

²³ Though one has to question the extent to which this really is valid Roman Catholic doctrine given Roman Catholic understandings of the reception of doctrine. This particular part of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching clearly has not been received by the faithful.

²⁴ It is interesting to note that in general I do not reject the exegesis in terms of general meaning offered even by conservative biblical scholars such as Robert Gagnon (Gagnon, R.A.J. (2001), *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, Nashville, Abingdon Press), it is the hermeneutical and theological use to which we put these texts with which I would take issues with a commentator such as Gagnon. He is concerned to defend the fact that these texts do indeed speak of sex between two men, something I entirely agree with. I do not agree, however, that this can be correctly categorised as 'homosexuality' in the sense we use the term today, or that it is condemned in the text for the reasons that he ultimately concludes.

does indeed create humanity “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Whilst I’m not terribly keen on the artificial reading of the doctrine of the Trinity into Old Testament texts, the use of ‘our’ likeness reminds us that (even though alien to the original intent of the author) God exists in Trinity; persons in communion, and humanity is called to model that. The question arises as to what kind of communion with other human beings we are called to live in? More specifically, what kind of communion with other human beings are gay people called to live in?

Some have argued that these texts suggest that the basic pattern of human existence in communion is marriage of a man and a woman. This is a considerable leap beyond the text, however, which makes it clear that humanity and the image of God comprises both men and women (though what exactly that image is, is not spelt out), and humanity as a whole is instructed to multiply. Certainly the text makes no reference to the so-called complementarity of male and female sex organs, any argument stemming from which is actually an argument from ‘nature’, not scripture, and I have already suggested above we need to be very wary of such arguments.²⁵ The text nowhere spells this out as a prescribed norm, however.²⁶ We also need to remember that within Christian doctrine our understanding of what it is to be human comes not simply from these creation accounts, but first and foremost from what is revealed in Christ about what it is to be human – the one who was both fully human and fully divine.²⁷ That Christ was single and left no offspring suggests that the divine pattern is not simply that which one can read into Genesis 1 and 2 of marriage between one man and one woman who must procreate. Jesus certainly lived fully relationally, but with a close group of disciples.²⁸ Certainly male and female within humanity as a whole being a counterpart to the divine image is something central to what it means to be human, and I would not want to underplay this, but this is never presented as a norm prescribing certain particular relationships to the exclusion of others.²⁹ It is also interesting to note that as a partner is sought for Adam in Genesis 2, God brings the various animals before Adam, but Adam does not choose any of them as his partner. Notice that it is Adam’s choice. God does not simply determine who the partner will be, but leaves that to Adam who does not find a partner. At that point God creates Eve, and Adam, upon waking, takes great delight in her. Adam took great delight in Eve. Christ chose to be single but found his partners and helpers in a close-knit group of disciples and friends. Gay people will often take delight, and find their partner and helper in someone of their own gender.

Whilst this goes some way to suggesting that human relationships, communion with others, is absolutely central to human identity, we now need to develop a more specific account of Christian identity. To grasp that, we have to understand what it is that St. Paul understands about being ‘in Christ’.

²⁵ on page 5

²⁶ For discussion of these texts with reference to same-sex relationships see: Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*. pp.114-120; and Moore OP, *A Question of Truth*. pp.118-150.

²⁷ This point is foundationally made by Karl Barth when he takes as the heading at the beginning of his discussion of theological anthropology, “Because man [sic.], living under heaven and on earth, is the creature whose relation to God is revealed to us in the Word of God, he is the central object of the theological doctrine of creation. As the man Jesus is Himself the revealing Word of God, He is the source of our knowledge of the nature of man as created by God.” Barth, K. (2009), *Church Dogmatics: III.2, The Doctrine of Creation*, London, New York, T&T Clark. p.3.

²⁸ In fact, following St. Paul’s advice to the unmarried and the widows that, if they can practice the self-control necessary they should remain single, the Christian tradition viewed this as the highest form of life for much of its history, this changing at the Reformation with the dissolution of the monasteries and the new emphasis on marriage and family life. For discussion of this move see: Shaw, Jane: Reformed and Enlightened Church in Loughlin, G. (2007), *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Oxford, Blackwell. pp.215-228.

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of the relationship of the image of God to gender see McFadyen, A.I. (1990), *The call to personhood: A Christian theory of the individual in social relationships*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. pp.31-39.

Christian identity: being in Christ

Within the canon of the New Testament questions of identity are very much to the fore, what does it mean to be a follower of Christ and what does that do to your identity? Clearly central to that was the great debate about whether or not Gentiles could be included within the community of Christ, and if so whether they had to abide by the Jewish law and the particular marks of separated identity, circumcision, and the purity and holiness codes. Ultimately, through grappling with their scriptures, listening to testimony of the work of the Spirit and discerning together, the Council in Jerusalem concludes that Christian identity is not determined by first of all needing to become Jewish (Acts 15). No longer is being Jewish or Gentile primarily determinative of one's identity, being 'in Christ' is. More than that, though, other forms of identity are relativised as well. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"(Gal.3:27-28). What we have here are biological identities (male and female) that are also culturally constructed³⁰, ethnic and religious identities (Jew and Gentile), and social identities (slave and free). All of these identities, however, are relativised by being baptised into Christ. Thereafter, whilst one might remain a Jewish slave woman, or a Gentile free man, what primarily identifies one are not those categories (though they are not wiped out), but rather the baptismal identity which brings one into Christ and the body of Christ, the Church.³¹ It is interesting to note that in terms of the 'engrafting' of the Gentiles into the 'vine' of Israel, St. Paul goes so far in Romans as to say that this is 'contrary to nature' (Rom. 11:24). God's action in engrafting Gentiles is described with exactly the same term as the 'contrary to nature' of the same-sex activity of Romans 1:27 (both using the Greek term, *para phusin* – 'contrary to', or 'beyond' nature).³² So radical an action is this of God, in drawing in the Gentiles who are precisely not God's people, that it merits the same term as those who, in Paul's view have given up natural sex for unnatural sex. God's definition of 'natural' and our human definitions of 'natural' are frequently at odds.

Through the centuries the Church has come, in different periods, to realise the political impact of this relativisation of human forms of identity by divine forms of identity. Ultimately it was realised that this relativisation of identity in Christ was politically more significant than the cultural acceptance of slavery which runs throughout much of scripture, or the cultural subservience of women within a patriarchal society which also pervades much of scripture. Given that we have identified gay identity as both a biological and cultural identity, is this too not relativised and subsumed under the identity of baptism into Christ? Is the identity of the gay Christian not first and foremost as someone who is 'in Christ', not someone who is gay? Whilst, a gay person remains gay whilst being in Christ, what is ultimately stronger – being joined to Christ by the Holy Spirit and in baptism, or human sexual orientation?

The Church has run into grave problems whenever it has sought to suggest that human biological or cultural distinctions are ultimately more central to the way we live our societal life together than baptism and our identity in Christ. This happened on two notable occasions in the twentieth century, firstly in Germany in the 1930's where Jewish identity was considered ultimately stronger than baptismal identity and the sovereignty of God over the Church was challenged by a human tyrant.

³⁰ Clearly conceptions of gender change in cultural contexts as much as notions of sexuality do. See: Shaw, Jane, Reformed and Enlightened Church, in Loughlin, *Queer Theology*. pp.222-223, where Shaw points out that from the classical period through to the Enlightenment, there was a conception of one sex hierarchically arranged, women being simply an inferior version of men.

³¹ For an extended reflection on baptismal identity as it relates to conversations about same-sex relationships see Rogers Jr., *Sexuality*. pp.37-66. My comments here, and thinking generally own much to Rogers work. The implications of this kind of thinking is also discussed by Elizabeth Stuart; see: Stuart, E. (2003), *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference*, Aldershot, Ashgate. pp.105-115.

³² See Rogers Jr., *Sexuality*. p.65.

This led to the formation of the confessing Church, and schism within the German Church.³³ The other occasion being in South Africa where race became a bar to full church membership, and racial and ethnic identity was given precedence in some Churches over baptismal identity into Christ and the reconciling work of Christ with all humanity.³⁴ This too, led to schism and effectively part of what had been the Christian Church being declared to be heretical and communion broken.³⁵

Bodies and bodily relationships

So if the identity of being 'in Christ', relativises any particular gay or straight identity, how then, are Gay Christians to live out their calling as human beings to be in relationship? I ultimately want to take us into the theology of marriage, but first of all I'm going to take us into the realm of sex.

We quite often in the life of the Church are rather reticent in thinking about our bodies, which is rather odd as they are central to our faith. Arguments over the bodily nature of the resurrection are often presumed to be about biblical authority, but in actual fact they are about far more than that. The physicality of the resurrection is also about the way in which physical, bodily life in the world matters to God (as it is created out of nothing by God) and is the hope of our salvation. We do not hope for the eternal life of a soul – but rather for bodily resurrection. God comes to us in a body that hangs on a cross, and redeems us as whole, bodily people. Therefore what we do with our bodies matters: they are indeed temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). In one of the most extraordinary bits of writing on sexuality I've ever read, Rowan Williams reflects on the nature of the 'Bodies Grace'.³⁶ Written before Rowan had to take responsibility for holding the Anglican Communion together, he reflects on the way in which our bodies become, through sexual relationships, a vehicle of grace. We are at our most vulnerable during sex, we can be more hurt physically and emotionally than at almost any other time. We reveal ourselves in total vulnerability. Equally, it can be the most intimate and extraordinary moment in which we come to know ourselves as desired, and as occasions of joy.³⁷ In this moment of the bodies grace, we come to know something of the grace of God, and God's desire for us and joy in us as we can only know being desired as we desire, and joy as we are enjoyed by the other. Williams reflects on the importance in relationships of truly taking time for this experience, and it would be worth noting that taking conjugal time in relationships

³³ For a very full account of this see: Scholder (1987-88), *The Churches and the Third Reich (2 Vols.)*, London, SCM. It is also worth noting that sometimes the events of life in the world cause the Church to return to scripture, and the tradition, and radically re-read them seeking, as ever, the living guidance of the Holy Spirit. One such moment was the crimes of the Nazi state in the *Shoah*. Following the deaths of millions of Jews in Nazi death camps, the Church had to reengage with its scriptures, particularly St. Paul's grappling with the universal scope of the work of Christ as well as the fact that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). The Church has repented of much of its dangerous anti-Semitism, and its supersessionism, and confesses a radically different relationship to the Jewish people than previously. It strikes me as noteworthy that thousands of homosexuals were also rounded up, forced to wear pink triangles on armbands, were horrifically tortured, and murdered in camps by the Nazi regime. In their instance, however, in some cases the liberating allies ruled that they should continue to serve their prison sentences to the end, as homosexuality was a 'legitimate' crime to have on the statute book which was punishable in allied countries too. No one was brought to justice at Nuremberg for those murders. I wonder what the theological response of the Churches to that should be? For an account of the Nazi treatment of homosexuals see: Plant, R. (1987), *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*, Edinburgh, New York, Mainstream Publishing.

³⁴ For an account of the background and theological implications of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches *Status Confessionis* see Karel Blei: *Apartheid as Status Confessionis* (<http://www.warc.ch/dcw/bs25/03.html>), accessed: 9th September 2011.

³⁵ When we stop to ponder the question of whether the issue of same-sex relationships is Church dividing or not, the answer depends on whether the Church is declaring salvation to be at stake in terms of whether the Church accepts that someone's primary identity is 'in Christ'. I do not hear people in the URC today trying to deny Church membership to those who are in same-sex relationships, or denying that they are in Christ through their baptism. Were I, I would be rather more concerned. Where the issue remains an ethical and secondary issue about blessings and ordinations (which is not to say these are not very important, but it is not of the same order of importance as being 'in Christ') it is not, in this view, Church dividing.

³⁶ Williams, Rowan D. *The Body's Grace*, in: Rogers, *Theology and Sexuality*. pp.309-321.

³⁷ Williams, *The Body's Grace*, in: Rogers Jr., *Sexuality*. p.312.

frequently means discovering that relationship in moments when, for whatever physical or emotional reason, sex does not happen – any pastor who knows their flock well has heard of the pain and joy such times can bring. Relationships are a risk, just as is responding to a call to be celibate. The risk in celibacy lies in setting out on the journey of discovering being desired and enjoyed in the sight of God without the sexual fulfilment of bodily relationship with another human being.

Williams wonders whether part of the issue that causes the Church so much trouble is that gay relationships cause one to stop and ask the question about what sex means: what it means to be bodily intimate with another human being.³⁸ He suggests, in essence, that the norm of heterosexual marriage as the sanction for sex, has frequently prevented us from asking about sex itself, and normally leaves us thinking only about societal and legal institutions. He suggests that because marriage is also inevitably often thought about as what he somewhat humorously calls “the means of production”, procreation, we stop thinking of what a relationship in its own terms might mean.³⁹

We need to be honest, and recognise that the Church does not now link marriage and procreation.⁴⁰ We do not prohibit contraception, but rather more often than not encourage it. We do not stop those who are infertile from getting married. We do not stop those past the childbearing age from getting married, and, in fact, in the Statement of Purpose in *Worship from the URC*, we place in brackets the part about children being born and nurtured.⁴¹ So what then, is marriage for? And who is called into it?

Marriage, vocation and the work of the Holy Spirit

Whilst some bits of the Church are rather happier thinking about sin and fallenness than others, I think we all know so well exactly what St. Paul means when he says that “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Rom. 7:15). All we need to do is reflect on the news on our television screens, as well as our own lives, to realise that the world is not presently as God intends it. And yet we are called, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, to live lives of holiness. We are not, however, abandoned in that call – it is something that first and foremost we do collectively. God’s people are Holy because God is Holy, we are Holy because we are of God’s people. And, in the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, we are led and guided in our journeys of discipleship as we continue the ever ongoing task of discernment.

The question before us is essentially how is a gay person to live? What life am I called to? This is fundamentally the same question that all human beings are called to answer. We are called to the discernment of vocation⁴²: is someone called to be in an exclusive sexual and emotionally committed relationship, which we normally would call marriage? Or to live life in relationship with others in other ways, in a life of celibacy. How are we to live out that fundamental call to be the relational people God has created us as? And of course often our struggle is to discern how we are to live when we are not able to live in the relationship that we believe is our vocation. The life of singleness when one’s deepest desires and needs are for deep, intimate emotional and physical

³⁸ Williams, *The Body’s Grace*, in: Rogers Jr., *Sexuality*. p.318f.

³⁹ Williams, *The Body’s Grace*, in: Rogers Jr., *Sexuality*. p.318.

⁴⁰ Williams sees this as seminal, he states that: “In a church that accepts the legitimacy of contraception, the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous biblical texts, or on a problematic and nonscriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures. (Williams, *The Body’s Grace*, in: Rogers Jr., *Sexuality*. p.320.)

⁴¹ The United Reformed Church (2004), *Worship: from the United Reformed Church (part 2)*, London, The United Reformed Church. p.167

⁴² For a fascinating discussion (from a normally ethically conservative theologian) on the relationship between gay identity, vocation and discernment, see: O’Donovan, O. (2009), *A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy*, London, SCM. pp.102-120.

relationship with an Other is a very hard place to be – and one, quite frankly the Church frequently makes altogether more difficult for all kinds of reasons (and not just for gay folk!).

But any musings on what it is we are called to be run the risk of producing unrealistic fantasy – just as the musings above on the meaning of bodies and sex can do the same. Life is not neat and tidy, as we all know too well. And we follow a Lord who says: “You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart”(Matt.5: 27-28). Following this Lord who says such things, who will dare, I wonder, cast the first stone?

But the Church does, in the power of the Holy Spirit, believe that the way in which we order our lives, as well as the way we order life in the world, leads towards sanctification: ever closer relationship with God and the fullness of life which Christ offers. Marriage is one of those ways in which God enables us to experience something of that. And let us not idolise marriage either – it too has changed as an institution massively over the centuries, but equally, it has always been a Christian ideal, always been about exclusivity. It is, though, frequently abused and can become abusive. Some marriages most definitely are not vehicles of grace or sanctification. St. Paul sees marriage as something of a second class activity. “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Cor. 7:8-9). This can lead to a rather gloomy account of marriage as a remedy for sin. This it may well be – but we celebrate it as a church as far more than simply this.

In many senses the pieces of the marriage jigsaw are already in place in what I have said before. When thinking about sexuality and desire, we commented that physical, sexual desire, and the emotional intimacy of connection ideally grow together. Marriage is where that is recognised and is indeed given the time and space to grow. We recognised as we spoke of what our bodies might mean and what sex might be about, that in such relationships we learn about being desired and being the occasion for joy, as we make ourselves supremely vulnerable to the Other, and ourselves take delight and joy in the other, all being occasions through which we learn of God’s desire and joy in us, and us in God. Marriage too, is one of the places where the fact that we are created for human relationship comes to flourish, human relationship which, in our relatedness both to God and the other person, makes marriage into what many sections of the Church have considered the ‘smallest church’, or the ‘domestic church’. This image reminds us that marriage, very fundamentally, is not simply for those within it, but those outside of it too. As Jesus performed his first sign at Cana at a wedding, so too communities of families, friends and congregations still gather to celebrate marriage. We celebrate it communally because marriage has a dimension that is precisely about supporting the wider communities of the church and world which lies outside of it. Very often, but by no means exclusively, part of this is indeed through procreation and the gift of children. That is not, by any means, the only ways in which couples exercise the ministry of marriage which is about tending and nurturing the whole of society, and those in need who surround that marriage. As marriage models the love between Christ and the Church, so too, marriage exists to offer hospitality to the stranger. In marriage at its best we come to truly know ourselves in the Other, come to truly know more of God through our being more than ourselves with the Other, and come to make known in the world something of God’s love for God’s people.⁴³

Once again, we must ask, if we take this kind of definition of marriage that I’ve just outlined above, and say that this is too a definition of what, at their best, same-sex relationships can be, is this what the Biblical prohibitions we examined above are speaking of? By no means. Taking the definition of homosexuality as the desire for relationship with another of the same sex, both physical and emotional desire such that we are “...persons who encounter the other (and thus discover

⁴³ These reflections on marriage owe much to Eugene Rogers, particularly see: Rogers Jr., *Sexuality*. pp.67-90.

themselves) in relations to persons of the same sex⁴⁴, are not committed, sanctified relationships such as I have defined marriage as, not one of the very best contexts out of which such a person might give glory to God and flourish on their path of discipleship and sanctification? Given that being 'in Christ' relativises all our human biological and cultural distinctions, is for the Christian gay person discovering the delight and joy of relationship in Christ through the delight and joy of sexual and emotional relationship with another not something the Church should bless, uphold and encourage? It is a deep conviction of myself, and many others, that the Holy Spirit is leading us once again to re-read our scriptures, re-examine our tradition, and confess that this is indeed the case.

So it turns out that a theology of same-sex relationships is, in fact, a rather traditional theology. It is rooted in God's grace, rooted in God's desire for all human beings to model God's image within them by living in relationship with others and with God. It is a theology that calls us to allow Christ to define our identity as we are baptised into him, rather than to allow our human identities to overturn the work of Christ and the Spirit. It is a theology that takes deeply seriously our bodies, and the fact that in creation, incarnation and resurrection God too takes deeply seriously our bodies in the process of redemption and that that can become real to us in loving sexual relationships. And it is a theology that call us into relationships that take deeply seriously all that our tradition teaches us, which so often we have forgotten, about what marriage is really all about. And all of that is, I believe, gospel. Good news. Not just for the gay person, but for the whole Church. And not just for the Church, but for all.

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⁴⁴ McCarthy, D.M. (2002), The Relationship of Bodies In Rogers Jr., E.F. ed. *Theology and Sexuality*, pp. 212-213.

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Towards A Theology of Same Sex Relationships

Rev Paul Stokes, Sept 2011

I am grateful for the opportunity, daunted by the responsibility, and would rather not be here! But the topic was put onto the URC agenda, and we don't have the luxury of ducking the issue.

The theology of same-sex relationships has been on society's agenda for longer. Two thousand years ago Emperor Nero¹ went through a marriage ceremony with two men and abused freeborn boys in the midst of an Empire riddled with sexual licentiousness.

Two weeks ago the Dr Who spin-off, Torchwood, featured several gay bedroom scenes and this morning-after-the-night-before dialogue between two homosexuals:

"Yes, I feel guilty about what we do. It hasn't made me stop doing it. Besides, I always hoped ...if God is love, maybe ...he loves me, too."

"That's blasphemy."

"I think that's Christianity."

It's a no-brainer, isn't it? Of course God is love, and he loves both of them. Captain Jack Harkness was theologically mistaken to call it 'blasphemy'. God is love, and His love for the world is so rich and deep that He gave His only Son to die a bloody death on a cross so that sin could be forgiven and life could be offered in place of death. Yes, it is Christianity.

But I suspect that the scriptwriter intends us to go *from* "God loves me" *to* "therefore I don't need to feel guilty because it's okay to do this, really." In other words, "God loves me and approves of what I do." And so it's only a partial theology. It's a theology which latches onto a facet of 'love' but loses its grip on sin, repentance and forgiveness. And those, too, are part of Christianity. But I wouldn't expect the BBC to get the whole Gospel right!

The reality is that gay sex is being increasingly 'normalised' by television, Hollywood, press and politicians. And in this context a dissenting, nonconformist view is difficult to uphold. It simply does not conform to the cultural trends and preferences which are also seeping into the Church.

I am convinced that sexual intimacy should be expressed only within the context of heterosexual marriage, and that this is the clear teaching of the Bible. But those of us who share this conviction have received a bad press ...and I suspect much of it has been deserved. Words have been spoken harshly, a critical spirit has coloured our comments, and judgmentalism has reared its ugly head. Truth has been told in a grace-less manner. It discredits the Church, it denies the character of Christ, and ironically it makes people deaf to the truth.

It would be easy to point at others, but I know this has described me at times. I say this, not because I want to be excused or forgiven, but because I'm asking for something more significant: **please will you entertain the idea that, no matter how badly the words may have been spoken, the underlying theology may still be true?** And conversely, please will you also **acknowledge that no matter how gracious a person might be, the underlying theology may still be mistaken?**

¹ Suetonius: *De Vita Caesarum--Nero* "He castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his home attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife." (XXVIII) "Doryphorus; for he was even married to this man in the same way that he himself had married Sporus, going so far as to imitate the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered" (XXIX) <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/suet-nero-rolfe.asp> accessed 10/9/11

When grace is spoken in a truth-less manner, when the Church's thinking is squeezed into a mould supplied by society², when truth of God is exchanged for a lie³ then the Church fails to be a prophetic voice recalling people to the revelation given by our Creator. A Biblical theology of same-sex relationships needs to be full of grace. That is an absolute. It also needs to be full of truth, as Jesus prayed: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."⁴ Truth remains true, no matter how badly it is spoken. Error is still error, no matter how graciously it is spoken. Jesus, the living Word of God, was full of both grace *and* truth⁵. Not either / or, but both.

During nineteen years of pastoral ministry in three churches I have encountered a small range of challenging sex-related scenarios: adultery, pornography, incest, paedophilia, cohabiting, lesbianism, and also adoption within a civil partnership. These have involved church members, or their family members, and at times people in forms of leadership. Pastoral ministry can be messy, and many of you know this better than I do. But we do need to dispel two myths:

First, the myth that we who hold to the church's traditional, orthodox teaching are closeted away in ivory towers and out of touch with reality. We are not. The fact is that we encounter the same difficult issues.

Second, the myth that we are only bothered about same-sex relationships. We are not. The truth is that we are concerned about the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and the sinfulness of *all* sexual activity outside of this context.

And in the midst of these challenging issues we are convinced that Christian discipleship, pastoral ministry and church leadership have to be well-founded on the revelation God has given in scripture. Proverbs tells us that "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint;" or "When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild."⁶ Discipleship and pastoral theology must be based on Biblical theology.

We do not worship the Bible. But we do worship the God who, through the power of His Holy Spirit, caused the Bible to be recorded for the benefit of His people.⁷ Jesus the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, the Word of God and the Truth of God, was speaking truth when he said that the Old Testament would not be abolished or edited, not even by the smallest pen-stroke, while this world remains;⁸ he was speaking truth when he said real wisdom and a solid foundation involves both *hearing* and *heeding* his words;⁹ and he was speaking truth when he promised his apostles they would be *guided into a right understanding* of truth by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

I therefore dare not sit in judgement on the Bible, setting aside its precepts according to my own preferences, or re-drafting its teaching to comply with what *I think* the authors *would* have said if they shared my knowledge and insights, nor do I demote scripture to mere human religious speculation and ask the familiar question: "Did God really say...?"¹¹ Rather I seek to sit in humility *under* it, taking God's revelation as my final authority. I have no doubt that I could do much better, but that's a problem with me, not with the Bible!

Within the Bible there are some threads of progressive revelation. For instance, there is only a little teaching about the person and work of the Holy Spirit through most of the Old Testament. But in the New Testament there is much greater clarity and information given. The same could be said

² Romans 12:2

³ Romans 1:24-27

⁴ John 17:7 NIV

⁵ John 1:14

⁶ Proverbs 29:18 - NIV & NLT respectively

⁷ 2 Peter 1:21 "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." NIV

⁸ Matthew 5:17-18

⁹ Matthew 7:24-29

¹⁰ John 16:12-15

¹¹ Genesis 3:1

about the promised Messiah – hinted at in the Old, revealed in the New. Like a growing plant, the growth and development is real but is also related to the seed’s DNA.¹²

Some threads reach their *fulfilment*, and the detailed application therefore changes. Once the Lamb of God was slain then the old sacrifices and rituals of worship reached their fulfilment and were superseded. In the same way, dietary restrictions no-longer apply once Jesus declared all foods to be ‘clean’.¹³

There are other threads which *remain consistent*. For instance: the call to live holy lives that are distinct from the surrounding culture and are light to the world; the command to love both God and neighbour; the call to be a people of worship, integrity and compassion. These messages are reiterated and clarified, but they are not revoked.¹⁴

The Bible’s teaching about same-sex relationships falls mainly within this last category. From Genesis to Revelation¹⁵ there is **consistent affirmation that sex is intended only between men and women**, and that sex between two men or two women (or with animals) is contrary to God’s will. It was not *initially* confined to *monogamous* marriage in the Old Testament, but as the revelation progressed it becomes clear that monogamy was the intended goal – as mentioned by both Jesus and Paul.¹⁶ However, **at no stage does the Bible state or suggest ...or even drift very slightly towards the idea... that gay or lesbian sex is an appropriate activity**. There is no sense of ‘dialogue’ about this within the Bible, with diverse opinions held in tension. **The Biblical witness is consistent**. The trajectory is steady.

Before going into detail, a thumbnail rationale for a traditional orthodox theology of same-sex relationships goes something like this:-

1. Genesis reveals God’s creational intent for sexual relationships as: man plus woman. This is seen in physiology, procreation and in a relational reflection of God’s own nature.
2. The Fall brought disorder to life on earth, including our sexual relationships. As God called Israel to be His distinctive people, same-sex intercourse was *one* of the behaviours that He ruled out of order.
3. Jesus reaffirmed “one man plus one woman becoming one flesh” as God’s creational intent, the context for sexual intimacy and, as an unmarried man, he himself remained celibate.
4. Paul observed that rebellion against God had led to a variety of sinful practices, one of which includes men and women engaging in same-sex intercourse. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and therefore our sexual behaviour is *not* inconsequential.
5. John emphasizes the profound importance of love, noting that love towards God and people is evidenced by obedience to God’s commands and turning away from sinful deeds.¹⁷
6. Finally, Jesus’ Revelation to John includes the stark reality that unrepentant engagement in sexual immorality results in judgement and exclusion.¹⁸

What does Creation reveal about how God made us for sexual relationships?

The opening chapters of the Bible set the scene, describing what it is to be human, and how human relationships are meant to be expressed. They are the foundation for teaching given by both by

¹² The appropriateness of this analogy is proposed by John Campbell in *Being Biblical* London, URC p.152

¹³ Mark 7:14-19

¹⁴ Campbell op cit p.151-153 believes this approach is over-confident. However, it is *clearly* one thread within the Bible

¹⁵ Genesis 2:21-25; Revelation 21:8,27; 22:15

¹⁶ Matthew 19:4-6 & Ephesians 5:31

¹⁷ 1 John 3:3-7 & 4:1-4

¹⁸ Revelation 21:8,27; 22:15

Jesus and by Paul. They describe what is ‘natural’ – that is, what is in accordance with our created nature.

First, the *relationships* of Creation reveal what is natural. Orthodox Christian faith is Trinitarian. God reveals himself as a mystical deity comprising Father, Son and Spirit in perfect relationship. He is the three-in-one, or triune, God, and in the beginning this “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”¹⁹

Every individual man and woman is made in the image of God. But it is also true that male and female *together* are created in the image of God. It is not male-plus-male (or female-plus-female) that reflects the image of God, but male-plus-female. Man and woman united in marriage form one of the most faithful reflections of the relationship within the Trinity. This is an inherent aspect of our created nature.

Second, the *biology* of Creation reveals what is natural. Biologically only the vagina is made for the penis. It has natural lubrication and multiple layers of protective skin cells in a way in which the anus does not, hence the dangers of infection and disease from anal sex are obvious. Anal intercourse is in this respect ‘unnatural’ or contrary to our *created* nature.²⁰

Third, the *original command* to humans reveals what is natural. “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth,” said God.²¹ So although procreation may not be the *only* goal of sexual intercourse,²² it is clearly a noteworthy part of it. Without heterosexual intercourse as the natural expression of sexuality, the future of the human race would be in jeopardy.²³ Same-sex sexual relationships are *inherently sterile* (ie: incapable of producing offspring) and contrary to God’s creational intentions. They are ‘unnatural’.

After Creation came the Fall, and the Fall had consequences...

In his letter to Rome, Paul affirms that he is not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that it is the power of God at work to save everyone who believes. His opening chapters paint a picture of universal human sinfulness which encompasses both Jew and Gentile alike. And against this grubby background he then splashes the bright colours of shed blood which saves us *from* sin and *from* the wages of sin (which is death).²⁴ That blood saves us *for* righteousness – for *being in the right* with God, and also for *living rightly* as a consequence.²⁵ All this becomes effective for us as faith joins hands with grace²⁶ – human trust holding on to God’s freely offered gifts of forgiveness (for sin) and reconciliation (instead of alienation).²⁷

The mere Bible reference may be familiar, but let us actually listen to a description of this sinful state – from which God rescues us at the cost of His own Son:

¹⁹ Genesis 1:27 NIV

²⁰ Adapted from “Conduct which Honours God? The Question of Homosexuality” (Simon Vibert, 2003)

²¹ Genesis 1:28 NIV

²² Genesis 2:18 indicates that male and female were created for companionship, while 1 Corinthians 7:4-5 appears to have more than simply procreation in mind: “The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” NIV

²³ Adapted from Vibert, op cit

²⁴ Romans 6:18,23

²⁵ Romans 5:6-9, 18-19

²⁶ Romans 5:1-2

²⁷ Romans 5:10-11

“Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshipping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshipped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other’s bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshipped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires.

Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved. Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarrelling, deception, malicious behaviour, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. They know God’s justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.”²⁸

Sin manifests itself in a Pandora’s box of ungodly behaviour and attitudes, and Paul catalogues about 20 of them here. The general scenario is that people rebel against God and abandon the truth. This creates the context in which a variety of specific rebellious actions and attitudes become commonplace. When people turn from honouring God and are released to express their fallen sinful nature, *sexual sin manifests as one part of the picture of shame*: women have sex with each other, and men have sex with each other.

This has nothing to do with the plea that same-sex relationships may be wrong in the context of idol worship, but are wholly acceptable in other contexts. If that were the case then for consistency we must argue that gossip, or deception, or some 20 other sins are wrong only in the context of idol worship, but they become quite acceptable in other contexts!

Some suggest that Paul is describing not ‘true’ homosexuals, but people who engage in gay or lesbian sex which is *contrary to what comes naturally to them*. They are the ones guilty of changing what is natural for the individual, but that the passage has nothing to do with gays and lesbians in loving, committed relationships:

...what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.²⁹

...persons who are heterosexual by nature have not only exchanged the true God for a false one, but have also exchanged their ability to relate to the opposite sex by indulging in homosexual behaviour that is not natural to them.³⁰

But there is no suggestion in the text that we are meant to draw a distinction between a ‘true’ homosexual (who acts *in accordance* with their nature) and a ‘false’ one (acting *contrary* to their nature). **The focus is on the sexual acts, not on the person’s sexual orientation.** Same-sex genital acts remain unnatural, no matter who engages in them. It goes “against the natural way to have sex.”³¹ It is contrary to our created nature because it does not echo the image of the triune God, it is not what the body parts were made for, and it can never extend the human race – all of which *are* part of our created nature according to Genesis.

²⁸ Romans 1:22-32 NLT (NLT used here for ease of listening)

²⁹ John Boswell *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980 p.109

³⁰ Scanzoni and Mollenkott *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?* New York: Harper and Row 1978 pp.65-66

³¹ Romans 1:26 NLT

Does it really matter what we do with the body?

In Corinth we encounter the wonderful description of the Church as the living Body of Christ, in which every one of us is a component part.³² We also encounter that marvellous description of the Church, and of a Christian's own body, as being the Temple of the Holy Spirit.³³ Christian faith is unashamedly corporeal. The ancient heresy of Gnosticism drove a wedge between the spiritual and the physical, but the Bible recognizes a *real* connection between our faith and how we use our physical bodies. Therefore we look for self-discipline and self-control rather than sexual indulgence:

*...we are the temple of the living God.*³⁴

*...let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*³⁵

*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!*³⁶

*Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.*³⁷

What we do with our bodies is not an inconsequential side-show. It has to do with worship, with honouring God, with holiness and with being a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. Our sexual behaviour matters as an integral part of our faith, and sexual misconduct among Christians is a deep offense to the God who saved us from sin by the sacrifice of His Son. This is true of *all* sexual behaviour outside the one intended context that God has given us – monogamous heterosexual marriage.

*Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*³⁸

These are behaviours which remain inconsistent with life in the Kingdom of God. They are practices which belong in the pre-conversion past, not in present discipleship.

The phrase “male prostitutes” is ‘*malakos*’ μαλακος. It might simply refer to soft or effeminate men, possibly the passive partner in consensual homosexual acts.³⁹ But there is uncertainty about the exact meaning, and attention is better devoted to the phrase “homosexual offenders.” This translates ‘*arsenokoite*’ αρσενοκοιτης, and is possibly the active partner in consensual homosexual acts. Paul invented the word. In 1 Timothy he says *arsenokoite* is “contrary to sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel”.⁴⁰ It is clearly wrong, but what does the word mean?

³² 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

³³ 2 Corinthians 6:16 (Church) & 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (Christian's own body)

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 6:16

³⁵ 2 Corinthians 7:1

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:15

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:18-20

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NIV

³⁹ This is the footnote given in the ESV translation

⁴⁰ 1 Timothy 1:10-11 NIV

Pro-gay apologists⁴¹ assert that if Paul simply wished to refer to ‘homosexuality’ then he could have used existing Greek words, and that he coined a new word because he had something else in mind. Therefore (they argue) he was not criticising homosexual activity *per se*, but only a particular manifestation of it. For instance:

*Malakoi refers to effeminate call-boys that Paul must have frequently passed on the streets... Arsenokoitai ...refers to the male patrons who bought their sexual services.*⁴²

But this is not accurate.

Arsenokoite combines two words. *Arsane* refers to males, with an emphasis on their gender. *Koite*⁴³ means ‘bed’ or ‘couch,’ used with a sexual connotation. Neither ‘male’ nor ‘bed’ carries any implication of the sex trade. There is no question that the cultural *context* in Corinth and elsewhere was riddled with prostitution, both heterosexual and homosexual, secular and cultic. But it is an imaginative leap then to claim that *arsenokoite* is a reference to prostitution. Paul does use the words *pornos* (masculine) in this passage, translated merely as “sexually immoral”⁴⁴ while a few verses later *porné* (feminine) is translated “prostitute.”⁴⁵ *Arsenokoite* obviously refers to something different.

A right understanding of the word comes from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. In the Greek Septuagint translation the words *arsane* and *koite* occur together. They are counterparts to the Hebrew words *mishkab zakur*⁴⁶ (‘bed’ and ‘males’). When Paul writes *arsenokoite* he is simply conflating the two words, and is echoing the words and teaching of these passages, which read:

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.

If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.

Evidently this is a *profoundly serious* matter. Chapter 18 begins and ends with a call for God’s people to live in a way that is radically different from the nations around them. The core of the chapter then describes a catalogue of sexual relationships to be avoided. Most of these are summed up in v6 as “close relatives.” The other prohibited scenarios are: during menstruation, adultery, men-with-men, and sex with animals.

Leviticus 20 has a different purpose, listing the punishments for a range of offenses. A large portion of these are illicit sexual relationships, all punishable by death: I’m not allowed to have sex with my daughter-in-law, or with another man, or with both my wife and my mother in law, or with my pet dog, or with my sister-in-law. There is no basis for making an exception in this list just for the same-sex relationships, treating *them* as equivalent to proper heterosexual relationships.

To recap:

- Some claim that the passages in Romans, 1 Corinthians and Leviticus are really about some form of prostitution – whether religious or social – and therefore have no relevance for “committed, loving homosexual relationships.” But this claim is not supported either by the word meanings, or by the contexts.

⁴¹ This is carefully argued by Boswell (op cit pp.341-344), but is also made by a large number of like-minded writers.

⁴² Bruce Gerig, <http://epistle.us/hbarticles/clobber1.html> accessed on 18/08/2011

⁴³ Romans 13:13 (“chambering” KJV or “sexual promiscuity” NLT) & Hebrews 13:4 (“Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed (*koite*) kept pure” NIV) – these are the only New Testament occurrences.

⁴⁴ *Porné* πόρνη and *pornos* πόρνος come from *pernemi* (to sell, akin to the base of πιπράσκω (G4097))

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:15-16

⁴⁶ Leviticus 18:22 και μετα αρσενος ου κοιμηθηση κοιτην γυναικος βδελυγμα γαρ εστιν

ואיש אשר ישכב את זכר משכבי אשה תועבה עשו שניהם מות יומתו דמיהם במ

Leviticus 20:13 και ος αν κοιμηθη μετα αρσενος κοιτην γυναικος βδελυγμα

ואיש אשר ישכב את זכר משכבי אשה תועבה עשו....

- The Bible's portrayal of holy living includes: heterosexual marriage as the only context for sexual relations. That's how it was in the beginning, in Leviticus, in Rome and Corinth, and it's the only context which is endorsed by Jesus.

What *did* Jesus say about sex?

You may have seen one of the standard gay-parade posters: "Here's what Jesus said about homosexuality..." – followed by a blank page. The message is that since Jesus said nothing, then he can't have been too bothered about it. And therefore we shouldn't be bothered it either.

So let's be consistent. Here's what Jesus said about incest: (blank page), about prostitution (blank page), about bestiality (blank page), pornography (blank page).

Jesus said nothing about spiritual gifts and how they are to be exercised; nothing about his own priesthood; nothing about Church as the Body of Christ. These are clearly mentioned in other places, but not on the lips of Jesus. We don't disregard these teachings simply because Jesus said nothing about them. Neither should we disregard other Biblical teaching about same-sex relationships simply because Jesus said nothing about them. In fact, to quote a URC working party:

*"...homosexual practice, in line with the biblical interpretation, was not an accepted feature of Jewish culture as it was among the Greeks. It is understandable, therefore, that the Gospels contain no reference to it."*⁴⁷

If Jesus had wanted to adopt a revised attitude – and he certainly did challenge contemporary assumptions on other topics – then it is bizarre that he said nothing. And when Jesus was presented with a devious question about sexual relationships, he *upheld the creational intent* – described in Genesis – as the standard by which to judge sexual matters:

*"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female'. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."*⁴⁸

God's intentions for sexual relationships include a "one-flesh" sexual union between husband and wife. Jesus may have been silent on the specific topic of homosexuality, but he *was* vocal in saying that the heterosexual relationship in marriage is the intended *context* for sexual intimacy.

A false kind of ethical reasoning

The Biblical teaching which relates to sexual behaviour presents a consistent picture. So to be supportive of same-sex relationships one *must sidestep* these Biblical passages. Perhaps the most prominent sidestep is a false kind of ethical reasoning which:

...finds a catch-word in Scripture like "justice" or "mercy" or "love" or "peace" or "kingdom of God," and then makes that catch-word the criterion of right and wrong without letting the specific commands of Scripture determine the content of the criterion.

⁴⁷ URC Working Party report Homosexuality: A Christian view (1991) p.14

⁴⁸ Mark 10:5-9 NIV

...a principle that has biblical sanction is lifted out of Scripture and the more detailed contours of that principle which are given in the specific commands of Scripture are ignored while the principle is shaped by someone's personal agenda.⁴⁹

In relation to same-sex relationships, this kind of approach emphasizes the primacy of love (which sounds good) but then squeezes and re-moulds it into something quite different from that which is described by the Bible. The commands of scripture are set aside or radically reinterpreted so that “lying with a man as one lies with a woman” is regarded as holy and good.

What a contrast with Jesus, who said:

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.⁵⁰

And John wrote:

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome⁵¹

The *principle* of love cannot be divorced from *obedience* to God's *commands*. Love *fulfils* the Law.⁵² It does not sit in judgment on the Law to contradict or dismiss it. To treat the principle of 'love' as a 'trump card' to override Biblical teaching is *fundamentally flawed*.

It is not loving to mislead people by teaching that “sin is not sin.” In truth it is irresponsible and dangerous: it abandons people to God's judgment and wrath rather than leading them to His mercy and forgiveness found through confession and repentance. This is a most un-loving and irresponsible approach. Jesus said it is also dangerous for those who *do* the misleading:

...if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.⁵³

This so-called 'love' which teaches and approves disobedience to God's commands is not truly love. The *sentiment* may be nice, but the *content* is licentiousness and libertinism. **Love has to take its definition and content from Scripture.** It requires us to *relate to all people* with respect, dignity and welcome. That's why I gladly knelt and reached out to pray for physical healing for a lesbian friend whose back was painful. Love does that. Jesus' loving touch brought healing to people in all kinds of situations – not as an approval of their behaviour, but as an expression of his grace. Love welcomes and brings blessings. But love does *not* mean affirming my friend's sexual activity within her committed, faithful civil partnership.

Within marriage we are commanded to be *faithful* – even though some might prefer an arrangement with mistresses and concubines or multiple wives. *Outside* of marriage we are commanded to be *celibate*. That was true for me before my wedding. It is true for my single friends who have been widowed, or divorced, or 'just are' single, or who are homosexual by orientation – even though some might prefer some other sexual arrangement. Jesus himself, an unmarried man with twelve close male friends, chose to remain celibate and sinless, even though he faced the full gamut of temptations ...including sexual ones.⁵⁴ He adopted celibacy for himself and taught it as an eschatological norm:

⁴⁹ John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/his-commandments-are-not-burdensome> accessed 7.9.11

⁵⁰ John 15:10

⁵¹ 1 John 5:3

⁵² Romans 13:10 - *torah*, rather than civil law, is the subject

⁵³ Mark 9:42

⁵⁴ Hebrews 4:15 “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.⁵⁵

I have neither the desire nor the intention to pretend that this is an easy option. I cannot imagine how deep a struggle would be involved. And Jesus himself acknowledged it is not easy:

"Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given."⁵⁶

But Christian discipleship *is not* easy – it repeatedly calls us to crucifying self, putting to death our fallen nature, and bringing our bodies into submission.⁵⁷

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.⁵⁸

Same-sex theology and...

In the brief space that remains I want to very briefly bullet-point a few connections between this theology and medical science, law and Church leadership. It can only be superficial, but it is nevertheless important.

Medical science

In relationship to medical science, we need to maintain a very careful distinction between biological or psychological descriptions on the one hand, and biblical commands and prohibitions on the other. The claim that "God made me this way" is a dangerous one. It ignores the reality of the Fall. But it also confuses "is" with "ought". Whatever science might say, it does not tell us what *God* says.

Having a paedophile member in a congregation is 'interesting'. But suppose medical science showed us that a sexual orientation toward children was an inborn, biological trait so that the person could justifiably argue that "God made me this way." *Of course* we would wish to protect children from exploitation. But what about 'love' and 'justice' for the adult's completely 'natural' desires?

Suppose we discover genes for alcoholism, or violence, or adultery? Sexual behaviour – or any other behaviour – which is Biblically condemned *cannot* be legitimized by a quick baptism in the gene pool. Or simply: biology doesn't determine morality. God does.

Law

In relation to the law, the *Nature, Faith and Order of the URC* puts it very neatly:

In the things that affect obedience to God the Church is not subordinate to the state, but must serve the Lord Jesus Christ, its only Ruler and Head.

Regardless of what the law may – or may not – require of us in the way we *treat* people, obedience to God requires us to *uphold* the Biblical teaching that same-sex sexual intimacy is sinful, contrary to

⁵⁵ Matthew 22:30 – unlike Islamic teaching that heaven provides a harem of virgins for our pleasure!

⁵⁶ Matthew 19:11

⁵⁷ Mark 8:34 "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

Colossians 3:5 "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

1 Corinthians 9:27 "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

⁵⁸ Galatians 5:24

the will of God and at odds with the ordination vows to live a holy life. There may be a cost to non-conformity, but we are not at liberty to sell out to the state or to society.

Church Leadership

In relation to leadership, we should be saying “follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.”⁵⁹ URC ministers vow to live holy lives (and I suspect we all constantly wish we did better at it!). I trust we would all agree that homosexual *orientation* is not a sin and is *not* a bar to ordination. Church leadership is open to a non-practising homosexual just as much as to a non-practising adulterer.

But if it is sinful to engage in same-sex *sexual relationships*, then it is wrong for the denomination to appoint as leaders people who engage in those activities, just as it is wrong to appoint as leaders people who are involved in extra-marital affairs or cohabiting. Conversely, if the URC – God forbid – decided to sanction Civil Partnerships being conducted on its premises, giving its blessing to same-sex sexual relationships, then theological integrity and consistency would also require it to state that same-sex relationships are not a bar to ordination. This is a profoundly significant discussion.

*The endorsement of homosexual relationships as on a par with heterosexual relationships expressed in marriage would represent a serious departure from the teaching of the Church throughout the ages, as well as from the teaching of Scripture.*⁶⁰

“If you love me,” said Jesus, “you will keep my commands.”⁶¹ And those commands include restricting sexual relationships to man and wife, and maintaining celibacy outside the marriage bond.

⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:1

⁶⁰ *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality*, Evangelical Alliance, London 1998 p27

⁶¹ John 14:21 & 15:10 – paraphrased

Sexual orientation: the lessons and limits of science

A Paper from the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland

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5.1 It appears from the results of the consultation exercise that it is now widely accepted in the Church that sexual orientation is not a matter of choice but is a “given”. While there may be some people who experiment with different sexual practices and some who claim that they have altered their sexual orientation by force of will, such accounts appear largely anecdotal and not the norm. As we explain in the next section, the testimony of those who came to tell us their stories also supports the view that sexual orientation is not a matter of choice.

5.2 Nonetheless, we conclude from the advice of our scientific advisers, whom we mention below, that science has not yet provided a clear answer as to the causes of different sexual orientations.

5.4 It is generally accepted that homosexual people comprise a very small minority of the population. The research, to which our advisers have referred in their papers, suggests that among males the prevalence is between 3% and 6% and among females between 1% and 3%. It is a rare trait and appears to be roughly half as common in females than in males. We discuss under *Subsequent Events* below a study which became available since we received the two literature studies.

The two literature reviews

5.5 There are likely to be a number of causes of sexual orientation. To obtain up to date scientific advice we commissioned two scientific literature reviews, one by Dr Isabel Hanson under the supervision of Professor Alan Wright, the other by Dr Murdo Macdonald. Dr Hanson has a PhD in molecular genetics. She spent 14 years researching human molecular genetics and she has worked as a science writer, specialising in genetics, since 2005. Professor Wright is a Programme Leader in the Medical and Developmental Genetics section of the Medical Research Council, Human Genetics Unit, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh. Dr Macdonald is Policy Officer of the Society, Religion and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland helping the Church to engage with ethical issues in science. He has a PhD in molecular biology and has twenty years research experience in that field, including involvement in human genetic studies. Our summary below is taken from both papers.

5.6 The development of a sexually mature individual is an extremely complex biological process that depends on multiple interactions between a whole host of genes and hormones. There are animal studies which suggest that hormonal imbalances contribute to a homosexual orientation. Ethical considerations prevent similar prenatal hormone tests on humans and the evidence is as a result fragmentary. Studies of the ratio of finger lengths have been used as a proxy mark for prenatal exposure to high testosterone levels which may affect sexual orientation. Studies of the brain structure of sheep have also shown differences which may be related to sexual orientation

and there is some limited evidence of that nature in relation to humans. Some studies have produced contradictory results. It is not possible to state the cause of the observed differences in the brain structure of people exhibiting differing sexual orientations; does the brain structure cause or contribute to the orientation or vice versa?

5.7 Genetic studies on humans in the form of identical twin studies suggest that genetic factors may have a moderate effect on the sexual orientation of both males and females. Studies of the effect of fraternal birth order (where a male child has several older male siblings) suggest that there may be a pre-natal mechanism for male homosexual orientation. But it should be noted that fraternal birth order may be a factor in only one in seven males who are homosexual.

5.8 There is therefore evidence which supports a biological basis for human sexual orientation but the evidence, from human studies, is fragmentary. The interaction of biological and social factors on sexual orientation is unknown. Some studies suggest that sexual orientation is not fixed in all individuals but, particularly in women, can change over time and not only during adolescence and early adulthood.

5.9 There is evidence that patterns of gender nonconforming behaviour in early childhood are a strong predictor of homosexual orientation. This may indicate a predisposition to homosexuality and be consistent with a biological basis of sexual orientation. There is little evidence at present that parental and peer interactions influence sexual orientation.

5.10 Studies of sexual reorientation therapy suggest that some individuals have succeeded in shifting their orientation; others have suffered psychological damage when attempting to do so. Dr Hanson and Professor Wright criticise the studies of those therapies as lacking scientific rigour and as being essentially anecdotal and identify a need for proper scientific research in this area.

5.11 There is as yet no unified scientific hypothesis for the origin of human sexual orientation. Dr Macdonald expresses the view that it is very rare that a biologist is able to say with absolute certainty that something is incontrovertibly proven.

5.12 Professor Wright and Dr Hanson consider that there is strong evidence from animal studies to support the hypothesis that sexual orientation in animals is determined by biological events in the womb. Data from animal studies have helped scientists to understand many aspects of human development and physiology. They recognise however the fragmentary nature of the evidence from human studies, which results from ethical constraints, and the present impossibility of an unequivocal statement about the origin of human sexual orientation.

5.13 They suggest that it is likely that there is a strong biological component in human sexual orientation. They conclude: The evidence that exists is consistent with, but does not prove, the hypothesis that human sexual orientation is caused by biological factors. There is no good evidence that dysfunctional parenting or seduction by an adult has any effect on sexual orientation; however a role of other non-biological factors cannot be excluded at present.

5.14 Dr Macdonald concludes that the scientific evidence that homosexuality is directly determined by the genes is probably not strong. He cites the 2008 statement of the American Psychological Association which said: Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Thus while genes and biology have a role in determining who

we are, social and environmental factors also play a role and he points out that humans have the ability to make choices about much of their behaviour. He opines that the scientific data is not sufficiently robust to support a conclusion that biology alone determines human behaviour. In other words biology may drive human beings in certain directions, but morality and other factors can influence how we behave.

5.15 We consider that the difference in emphasis between the two papers may in part be the result of Dr Macdonald's focus on the human research while Professor Wright and Dr Hanson attach considerable weight to the less constrained and thus more complete animal studies. However, care needs to be taken and views may differ on how far one can reliably extrapolate from animal studies to humans.

Subsequent events

5.16 Since we commissioned and received the two reports we have become aware of a report by the Office for National Statistics which was published in September 2010. The report, which is entitled "Measuring Sexual Identity: An Evaluation Report", involved either face to face interviews or telephone interviews between April 2009 and March 2010 and 247,623 people aged sixteen or above were asked to identify their sexual identity. Ninety six per cent provided valid responses. This accordingly is a large study, which deserves to be given considerable weight.

5.17 It revealed that 94.8% of those interviewed described themselves as heterosexual or straight, 1% as gay or lesbian and 0.5% as bisexual. A further 0.5% identified themselves as "Other". A further 2.8% either stated that they did not know or refused to answer the question and 0.5% did not give any response. Thus while the figure of 1% gay or lesbian appears to be lower than the other surveys discussed in Dr Hanson's report, some allowance should be made for the fact that the study was not carried out anonymously and some respondents may have felt inhibited about revealing their sexual identity or orientation.

5.18 In any event the survey supports the view that homosexual people are a very small minority of the population.