

Thinking Theologically about Same-Sex Relationships

Introduction: Community and Honesty

The debate surrounding the place of lesbian and gay people in the Church has often been compared to that surrounding the place of women. To be sure, there are similar features: for example, tradition and reform, the interpretation of the Bible, the relationship of the church to society, the validity of a sense of personal call and finally, the presence of patriarchy as a force in both church and society. There is one feature which makes the debates markedly different, however, and that is the fact that women were not admitted to office in the church before and until a change had been agreed to the practice and procedure of the church; whereas there have always been lesbian and gay people serving the church as members, and gay men serving as elders and ministers, regardless of church polity. Since the ordination of women, lesbian members have also served the church as elders and ministers. Some lesbian and gay members, elders and ministers have been in relationships (both heterosexual marriage and same-sex relationships) and some not; some have chosen to be single because of their faith and some not; some have been open about their sexual orientation to their congregation and others have been fearful to be honest. The reality is that presbyteries have regularly inducted and ordained lesbian and gay people to the ministry of word and sacrament: the difference is that sometimes an unspoken policy of 'don't ask and don't tell' was being followed and at other times everyone was oblivious to the fact (except for the minister!)

Lesbian and gay people in the church have become expert at assessing who can be trusted, avoiding questions about marriage and family and, in effect, living without the affirmation and respect of their church. Recent research in The Church of England reveals that many homosexual clergy left parish life for other spheres of ministry because they did not feel respected, valued or supported within the church.ⁱ

A key theological challenge which the church faces therefore is one of truth: can the Church of Scotland be a place where its members and ministers may speak truthfully about their lives without fear? What is the relationship between a community of honesty and its peace and unity? One answer to this question is to explore what it means to be an 'inclusive church' which embodies in its life the unconditional welcome of all people by Jesus to his table.ⁱⁱ These are questions about the nature of community, and the type of community the church senses God is calling it to be.

Church and Diversity

Truth operates within this debate in another way, however. The lived reality of people's lives, and the choices people of faith make, are ranged against a truth claimed to be Christian, orthodox and Biblical. It is important to note that The General Assembly of The Church of Scotland has received numerous reports which accommodate in their arguments a diversity of Christian theological opinion and the church has been enjoined, by these reports and deliverances, to engage in courteous debate and conversation.ⁱⁱⁱ

This diversity is entirely in keeping with the history and theology of the Christian Church: Christians have never believed in the same things in every place and at every time, and even the meaning of core statements of faith (for example, Jesus is Lord) have been disputed. Similarly, Christians have always given the Bible authority but how this functions within the community of faith has varied. St. Augustine argued that *"whenever the literal meaning of scripture clashed with reliable scientific information ... the interpreter must respect the integrity of science or he would bring scripture into disrepute."*^{iv} Whether the Bible is viewed as The Word of God *simpliciter* or as 'containing the Word of God' (as in mainstream Reformed tradition) it still requires to be interpreted. Those who read the Bible and interpret it bring to it a set of theological principles (and sometimes human prejudices) which are not derived in their entirety from the text, though that claim is usually made. It is therefore honest to admit that opposition to homosexuality is not because 'the Bible says so' but that the Biblical text is used to support and endorse pre-existing thoughts and feelings. (In a similar way, the Bible did not make people support apartheid in the South Africa of some decades ago, but the Bible was used to support apartheid by some Christians)

The Christian Church must be a place where the diversity of faith experiences and theological opinions are respected or otherwise worship of the one, living God will be replaced with the worship of one particular view of the Bible and theology.

Relationships and Humanity

In the debate on same-sex relationships it is worth noting certain facts. First, homosexuality, as we understand it, is a new phenomenon and a result of 19th century psychology: the writers of the Bible, while condemning particular sexual activities, knew nothing of sexual orientation. Secondly, our understanding of

human reproduction is also modern; the Bible views human sperm as sacred, as it contains all that is required for life, so it must not be wasted. This belief gives rise to the injunctions against certain male sexual acts, including masturbation. Third, marriage has been viewed in different ways by the church through the centuries and has had its place in human society for varying sociological reasons. Within the Biblical text relationships between women and men change and develop. Marriage is important to the church, yet St. Paul's comparison of Christ's relationship to the church with the marriage relationship (Ephesians 5:22-33) does not see the latter as one of mutuality, reciprocity and equality which is what is celebrated today. In the Reformed tradition marriage is understood as a vocation, or as a calling; yet it is the experience of lesbian and gay Christians who are in relationships that they also feel called and blessed by God in their relationships. God is a God of freedom and the Spirit blows where it will.

A doctrine of marriage has never been at the core of Christian orthodoxy and it is far from clear why it now seems to have this place for some. There are many other subjects of concern and relevance to contemporary church and society – such as the resurrection, usury, poverty, etc – yet they have not been given the status of the touchstone of truth. It is not just lesbian and gay people and their relationships who are seen by some as unacceptable but also heterosexual people who, following a conscience informed by their faith, wish to affirm and include the same in the Christian community.^v Christ's commands to love and not to judge seem to be ignored, making this debate all the more disproportional to the wider work and witness of the church.

Society and Affirmation

In the meantime, lesbian and gay people, and same-sex relationships, have found increasing equality under the law in the UK. In the workplace it is illegal to discriminate against a person on account of their sexual orientation. In most every respect the law views heterosexual relationships and same-sex relationships in the same way, on the basis of equality, human rights, justice and respect for the person.^{vi} These concepts are not unknown or irrelevant to Christian theology^{vii} and many people within the church, and perhaps more importantly outside the church, cannot understand why the Christian community finds it hard to embrace them. Lesbian and gay people are therefore simply looking for the same affirmation and support within the church as has been found elsewhere – among friends, in families and workplaces. The argument that lesbian and gay people must not experience the support, fulfilment and joy of a loving relationship, in the same way that heterosexual people do, is heard as singularly mean and lacking in compassion – a violation of the command of Jesus to do to others what you would have them do to yourself. An ethic of sexuality, if it is to be just, must give the same rights and responsibilities to all people.

Conclusion: God and Grace

At the heart of every expression of Christian theology is a vision of God: what Christians believe about God is of crucial importance. In conclusion therefore, the following principles are advanced:

1. Only God is God: the Scriptures, tradition and theology are not God and not to be worshipped.
2. God is the one who loves in freedom, not as the world loves, and who is made flesh in Jesus.
3. The created order is not as it ought to be as seen by the human failure to live in peaceful and just community.
4. God invites all people to live in love; above all else, the Christian community is to be a community of love.
5. God gives to all people gifts for ministry and service, in church and world.
6. Human beings are bodily and sexual and made for love: within relationships of respect, equality and sensitivity all people may grow in grace and be witnesses to the love of God.
7. The Christian gospel is Good News for all people: the gospel is compromised when it is heard as condemnation and not grace, by exclusion and not welcome, by fear and not love.

¹ "Are They Refugees?" Why Church of England Male Clergy Enter Healthcare Chaplaincy, *Practical Theology*, Vol 1, No 2 (2008.)

¹ See, for example, Chapter 7 of *On Human Worth*, by Duncan Forrester, (SCM Press 2001.)

¹ See, for example, reports to The General Assembly on Human Sexuality (1994), Christian Marriage (1994), the Interpretation of Scripture (1998) and Same-sex relationships (2007.)

¹ p123, Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, (The Bodley Head 2009.)

¹ See, in this regard, Nancy Duff, 'How to Discuss Moral Issues Surrounding Homosexuality When You Know You Are Right' in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, edited by Choon-Leong Seow, (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.)

¹ Evangelical writer Jim Wallis supports civil rights for same-sex couples on this basis; see his *Seven Ways To Change The World*, (Lion, 2008.)

¹ See, for example, George Newlands, *Christ and Human Rights*, (Ashgate 2006.)



The Bible and Homosexuality

There are about half a dozen Bible passages commonly used to discuss the topic of 'homosexuality.' However, an examination of the Hebrew and Greek texts, using the latest exegetical studies and commentaries, demonstrates that Scripture does not, in fact, address 'homosexuality' much less condemn it. This conclusion is supported by the fact that some Bible publishers are removing the word 'homosexual' from their more recent English versions.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in **Genesis 19:1-11** (from which we get the English word 'sodomy' which can refer to heterosexual activity, including that between a husband and a wife) is about the threat of gang rape and mob violence and the extreme limits to which the Biblical code of hospitality – welcoming and sheltering a stranger or foreigner – is to be practised.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are part of the Holiness Code which condemns Hebrew men spilling their seed. In order to be fruitful and multiply as the covenant people of God and to survive as a distinct religious group in a harsh desert land, the men of Israel, who were thought to contain a finite number of miniature human seeds inside their testicles, were not to 'waste their seed' in any ways other than planting them in certain prescribed females (for example, a Hebrew wife, multiple wives especially as one wife might be barren as in the story of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, or a slave as in the story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar.) Further, this was to be only when the woman was impregnable, that is, no sex during menstruation, no masturbation or coitus interruptus ('onanism' from the story of Onan), and no sex with animals or with various proscribed types of people – male and female. Rather than observe this ancient Israelite context (ignorant of human reproduction though it is), the *New Living Translation* (1996, 2004) chooses to state: 'If a man practices homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman, both men have committed a detestable act. They must both be put to death, for they are guilty of a capital offense.' (Leviticus 20:13)

The English word 'sodomite' was inserted into the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible in 1611, in **Deuteronomy 23:17, 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46, and 2 Kings 23:7**. 'Sodomite' was used to translate a Hebrew word *qadesh* which means, literally, 'holy' and implies in these verses 'holy temple prostitute' (or 'cult prostitute' or 'sacred prostitute'). As with all forms of sexual exploitation, gender is not the issue: prostituting children or adults – regardless of the gender of the victim or the gender of the prostitute – is wrong. It is important to note that *The Living Bible Paraphrased* (1971) decided to use 'homosexual' and 'homosexuality' in the first two of these passages, but now its successor, the *New Living Translation* (1996, 2004), uses 'temple prostitute' and 'shrine prostitutes' – male and female.

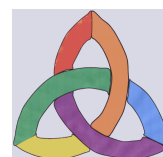
In the New Testament, Paul discusses the major issue of monotheism and polytheism in his letter to the church in Rome. In **Romans 1:26-27**, he uses, in an analogy, the Greek phrase *para phusin* which gets incorrectly translated as 'unnatural' or 'against nature.' The word *para* (same as the English prefix 'para') means 'exceptional,' 'different,' or 'beyond the usual.' Modern English examples are 'paramedic' and 'paralegal': a paralegal secretary working in a solicitor's office is not 'against the law' or 'illicit,' and a paramedic working for an ambulance service is not 'against medicine,' or 'unhealthy'. In contrast, 'para' refers to one thing being along side, or next to, another.

Paul uses in this passage the Greek phrases *pathe atimias* ('passions of dishonor' or 'degrading passions' or (KJV) 'vile affections') and *orexis* ('passion,' 'yearning,' or (KJV) 'lust'). In 1 Corinthians 7:9 Paul again refers to 'passion': 'But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn' (KJV). For Paul, sex is not the problem: passion is – so much so that marital sex acts are judged by him to be the cure of last resort! Paul felt *all* passions were 'dishonorable' and urged Roman Christians to believe 'naturally' in one God, rather than 'exceptionally' in more than one God, that is, polytheism – which is not 'against belief' or 'atheism.'

In **1 Corinthians 6:9-10** and **1 Timothy 1:9-10** Paul lists a variety of sins, two of which get mistranslated as 'homosexuals.' (The *Good News Bible* (1976, 1994, 2004) prefers 'homosexual perverts.'). In the Corinthians list, the Greek word *malakos* means 'soft' or 'gentle.' The KJV translated it as 'effeminate.' Given that Paul's intended audience was male, he is saying men should not appear 'feminine' or act 'lady-like.' Whether describing the 1st century Roman world or the 21st century world, there are 'straight' men who are feminine in style and personality, and there are 'gay' men who are masculine and quite manly. One's primary personal demeanor does not have anything to do with the primary gender one finds most attractive.

As for the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, no one knows nowadays what it really meant during Paul's time. It only exists in Scripture in these two vice lists, and there are few contemporary examples to go by. Thus to assume it means 'homosexuals' (*Today's New International Version* (2004) opts for 'practising homosexuals' in the Corinthians list and 'those practising homosexuality' in the Timothy list) is faulty scholarship and extremely discriminatory. Where this word is included in extra-Biblical ancient lists, the other words in the lists are not related to sexual activity but rather economic injustice and exploitation. So it is fair to assume Paul is referring to some kind of economic exploitation, like slavery or prostitution. As with all forms of exploitation – sexual, financial, physical, etc. – gender is not the issue. To insert into the Bible the word 'homosexual' – a term coined in the late 1800's by schools of psychology and sociology to designate a person who is attracted to another person of the same gender – is both anachronistic and unfounded.

Bibles recommended for worship and study are the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989) which does not retain the word 'homosexuals' printed in the *Revised Standard Version* (1946), and the *Revised English Bible* (1989) which does not retain the phrase 'homosexual perversion' printed in the *New English Bible* (1961). For a paraphrased version, *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson (1993, 1994, 1995) is good.



The Worship of the Church and the Pastoral Need for Inclusion

One of the regular, but thankfully not frequent comments, that ministers are greeted with at the church door after the service is: "I didn't like the hymns today!" This encapsulates very well the way many people engage with worship: it is taken very personally. Worshippers look for ways of engaging with what has been prepared for them, for something that links their story with the wider story, with God's story, something that makes the public worship personal worship rather than just a performance witnessed.

Who are the people who gather for worship, Sunday by Sunday - or who have stopped gathering because they felt it wasn't for them? Consider a congregation gathering

*We come to worship as the people who we are,
with all the baggage that we have accumulated over the years,
with memories and dreams, old wounds and new developments, hopes and fears, needs
and limitations, personal hang-ups and pet hates – and favourite hymns!*

*We come with cultural assumptions that go back centuries as well as with the fresh
memory of what happened on our way to church.*

*We bring our lives and hopes and desire to put them into the wider context of God's story of
healing and redemption.*

*We want to make the connection, possibly to make sense of our particular situation through
relating it to the wider picture.*

We have been told about God's love for us.

*We look for signs that there is a place for us, a role to play in the story of salvation that is
unfolding even today.*

This is deeply personal. And it means that worshippers are often focused on what is often referred to as 'a personal relationship with Jesus': they are looking for something for themselves. These are factors for the pastor to hold in her or his mind as each pastoral encounter unfolds: how can this individual be nurtured in faith and the wholeness of their unique life?

It can be quite a leap, for many, to think about what it means that each individual worships in a community of believers. Thinking of ourselves as part of a community, whether of worshippers or just any kind of community, is not something that comes naturally to most of us. This is where the hard work starts.

Remembering that the person next to us (and, from the leader of worship's perspective, each person in the pews) has a very different story to tell, quite different needs and longings, will require imagination and sensitivity and an awareness of what it might really mean that we are all unique and at the same time God's beloved children. Human beings are usually better at making assumptions about each other. This easily leads to treating each other like card-board cut-outs, as if any of us were one-dimensional and not made up of multiple facets, some more to the fore, some hidden. We will not always know what other people's particularly sensitive areas are, or what their particular needs are at any time.

So, what can be done if it is desired that worship be relevant to all who are present?

How is language used in a way that doesn't make people feel excluded, that doesn't offend?

How is ritual created and conducted in a way that people can relate to it without either having to have a degree in theology, or alternatively having to leave their minds at home?

How can talk of God and worship of God happen together in a way that everyone will feel this is about God and me and those around me, all bound up together?

Is it possible to include everyone, or will we end up with the lowest common denominator, with something bland, inoffensive and limp which will not set any hearts on fire? It would be possible to have 5 different services on a Sunday to desperately cater for all the different groups and their needs, and therefore never ever worshipping together as the whole body of Christ. (One service for the young families, one for the traditionalists, one for the young people and the praise band, one for the Taize and Iona fans, one for people who don't like getting up early...and so on!)

Is this avoidable? Is it inevitable? Is it possible to find in worship a sense of belonging together in Christ, who prayed so hard that his disciples might be one, even if differences need to be acknowledged? Is there a way of bearing with one another and bearing one another's burdens – or is there a point where a line has to be drawn? Could worship become exclusive in its inclusiveness because it is meant only for people who share a particular interpretation of the Gospel story? What happens to the body of Christ when the cohesion is lost? Do we create lots of little, separate bodies of Christ to allow for our inability to live with one another?

The church is called to be one. Nobody ever said it would be easy. There is a responsibility to consider diversity and unity in the planning and conduct of worship. Worship must be as user-friendly (understandable, accessible and nourishing) for the first-time worshipper as well as for the person who has sat in the same seat for sixty years. Space needs to be made in our worship for all our human experience, all our manifold ways of living, all the diverse longings for God's healing love. But maybe most importantly we need to leave room for God.

Room for a God who is not made in our image.

Room for a God who does not conform to our comfort zones.

Room for a God who is both close and distant, a God who can enfold us with intimacy as well as confront us with 'otherness.'

Room for a God who offers us healing and love as well as frightening challenges.

Room for a God who has the audacity to call us to be one - as God and Christ are one.

Jesus thought it was possible.

Jesus thought it was essential.

Can the Church settle for less?

(This is a slightly adapted version of the paper given by The Revd. Sigrd Marten at 'Praying For An Inclusive Church,' a service held at St George's West Church in Edinburgh, during The General Assembly of The Church of Scotland, May 2009.)

