

The Church and human sexuality: Six key issues

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In the ongoing debate surrounding the attitude of the Church towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships, the following six issues frequently come to the fore:

- The authority of Scripture
- The nature of marriage
- The ministry of the Holy Spirit
- The meaning of love
- The mission of the Church
- The unity of the Church

Entire books could be – and have been! – written on each of these, but here we shall seek to address each in short compass.

The authority of Scripture

Reference is often made to the three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition and reason/experience. There is widespread agreement that the Bible does not speak about sexual activity between people of the same sex in positive terms and that in the few passages where it is expressly referred to, the tone is negative. It is also recognised that tradition, through 2,000 years of church history, has been negative towards homosexual relationships.

At an open meeting I attended on this issue at a local parish church, a member of the clergy who is openly supportive of same-sex relationships made the observation that without an external revelation from God, ‘we are hostage to our deceptions’. That is a very pertinent point and underlines the importance of ensuring that tradition and reason/experience are kept subordinate to Scripture. A failure to recognise the supreme and final authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice will inevitably lead to setting mere human thoughts and opinions above the divine revelation – the very thing that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for doing (Matthew 15:1-9).

Care needs to be taken that we do not ‘make the commandment of God of no effect’ by our own traditions or by our own reasoning, and that we do not fall into the trap of ‘teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’. Jesus very clearly sets Scripture – the Word of God – above tradition and human reasoning/experience. This has been, and remains, the stated position of the Church of England.¹

In short, human thought and experience must be subjected to the Word of God and tested by the Scriptures, and not the other way around.

¹ Article 6 of the Thirty-nine Articles states: ‘*Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.*’

Our faith is therefore to be determined and governed, not by tradition and/or by reason/experience, but by Scripture. The Article on the Church defines the visible Church as ‘a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance’ (Article 19). NB It is not tradition or reason/experience that is to be preached, but ‘the pure Word of God’.

In addressing the authority of the Church, Article 20 further emphasises the supreme authority of Scripture above tradition and human reason: ‘[I]t is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.’

The nature of marriage

It is frequently argued that Jesus did not specifically address the question of homosexual relationships. However, the gospels do record that Jesus upheld the teaching of the Old Testament in every respect (e.g. Matthew 5:17-20). More specifically, they also demonstrate that he upheld the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures on marriage and sexual morality.

When asked directly about the nature of marriage, Jesus referred back to the divine pattern established from creation. He taught that marriage was not the product of human tradition or of reason and experience, but that it was ordained by God (Matthew 19:1-12). In fact, Jesus went beyond that in declaring that it was with marriage in view that God made two kinds of human being in the first place. He could have created only one type of human being – just males or just females. But he didn't. Or he might have made three, four, or even more sexes. But again he didn't. He made two different kinds of human – a male and a female – in order to bring them together in marriage.

Jesus taught that when a man and a woman marry, they enter a union that is closer and more intimate than the relationship they have known with their parents. In marriage they are forming an exclusive attachment that has the potential of producing children who, in turn, may in later years form their own families.

Throughout both Old and New Testaments, marriage is presented as the public union of one man and one woman – an institution to be honoured and respected by the whole community. The Lord Jesus Christ said, 'Those whom God has joined together, let not man separate.' No one and nothing should come between a man and his wife to separate them. Marriage is a publicly-made bond that deserves public respect.

Any deviation from the creation ordinance of marriage as the lifelong and exclusive union of one man and one woman therefore represents a departure from God's plan. The Church can therefore not countenance marriages between people of the same sex any more than it can celebrate polygamy or 'fixed-term' marriages.

The New Testament also teaches that the complementary union of a man and woman in marriage is intended to serve as a picture of the union between Christ and his bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). We therefore dare not engage in any redefinition exercise when it comes to marriage. To tamper with God's design for marriage is to distort the image God has given of a heavenly reality that lies at the very heart of the gospel. This cannot be regarded as a secondary issue or treated as a matter of 'adiaphora'.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit

Changing attitudes towards homosexual relationships are sometimes attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. One clergyman writes:

[O]n the subject of gay marriage I believe the Spirit is already transforming hearts and minds such that we will as a church eventually catch up and embrace it.

However, since the Old Testament Scriptures were penned as holy men were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), and since the New Testament Scriptures were written by the apostles and their close associates who had received revelation from the Spirit of truth (John 14:26; 16:13-16), we have no basis for thinking that the Holy Spirit will lead his people to embrace something at variance with the written Word of God.

The Holy Spirit has not changed in his nature or character; he will therefore not contradict the truths and realities which he revealed to the apostles and prophets, but will rather testify to them. He ever remains the *Holy Spirit*, whose work it is to promote righteousness and to bring his people into ever-increasing conformity to the standards of his Word. To suggest that the Holy Spirit is leading people to adopt and approve patterns of behaviour which the Scriptures describe as sinful is bordering on blasphemy.

If there is any transformation of hearts and minds to accept things which God condemns in his Word, or to reject things which God commends and commands in his Word, we can be sure that it is not due to the working of God's Spirit. Rather, there is another spirit at work – what the Bible refers to as 'the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience' (Ephesians 2:2).

The meaning of love

Advocates of same-sex marriage invariably appeal to the teaching of Jesus that we 'love one another'. The implication seems to be that it is loving to support and celebrate homosexual relationships and unloving to oppose them. In reality, however, the opposite is the case.

It is not possible to sweep aside God's commands relating to human relationships and the divinely-established pattern for marriage by an appeal to 'love'. The New Testament teaches that love is not at variance with God's law, but rather that love fulfils the law. The commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself' provides a summary of the moral law as it relates to our duties towards each other (Romans 13:8-10). It is not at all inconsistent with the law.

True love, therefore, will never be at odds with the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures. We cannot therefore dismiss the teaching and commands of Scripture in the name of pursuing 'love', because love is defined by that teaching and those commands.

Clearly, it is not loving to encourage behaviours and to promote lifestyles that exclude people from the Kingdom of God. And yet the New Testament includes homosexual conduct within the unrighteous conduct that will prevent people from inheriting God's Kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). True, it is not the only pattern of behaviour identified in that passage, but then I am not aware of any proposal that the Church should formally approve of or celebrate fornication, idolatry, adultery, theft, covetousness, drunkenness, reviling or extortion. All these are recognised as sins and it is not considered unloving to name them as such. We need to ask ourselves on what basis we should consider it incompatible with 'love' to retain homosexual conduct within the examples of unrighteous conduct identified in 1 Corinthians 6.

In advancing a case for the acceptance of same-sex relationships, one incumbent asserts: 'Change happens not by expert crisis management and diplomatic skill, but by sheer grace, extravagant grace.' And 'extravagant grace' is precisely Paul's theme in 1 Corinthians 6. The apostle writes:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Extravagant grace is seen in the washing, sanctification and justification of sinful men and women – including homosexuals. Yet if the Church declares as righteous behaviours which are condemned by

God, then those who engage in them may be prevented from seeing their need of cleansing, sanctification and justification, and thus find themselves excluded from the Kingdom of God.

By all means, our doors must be open to every category of 'the unrighteous' mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6 – and more! But if our view of 'inclusiveness' means that we approve of lifestyles described as 'unrighteous' and fail to issue a clear call to repentance, we are not showing love at all. We are, rather, holding back the very message that can bring cleansing, sanctification and justification.

True love demands that the Church be honest with people about God's standards in order that they may be brought to repentance, receive the extravagant grace of God and inherit his Kingdom.

The mission of the Church

It is frequently assumed that, in order to establish a connection with the general population, the Church needs to flow *with*, rather than *against*, the tide of public opinion. As one local vicar put it:

The anti-gay message also grieves me because it seems to be going so much against the tide at a time when we are increasingly losing touch with the majority of our population. Only about 5% of the population regularly attend church. How do we tell the story of God's love for all people, when we are perceived to be so anti something which the majority of people in our society now think of as a good thing?

The extent to which the general public thinks that homosexual relationships and same-sex marriage are 'a good thing' is open to question. Amid press reports of people facing sanctions of various kinds for expressing their opposition to same-sex relationships, marriage or adoption etc, there is a widespread fear of expressing any view that may be regarded as 'homophobic'. Public opinion polls and surveys therefore may not always be reliable indicators of public attitudes.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether the Church should be concerned to ensure that its thinking and attitudes reflect the prevailing mood of the culture.

The response of the New Testament to that question is clear. The mission of the Church is to be faithful to the Scriptures in its faith and conduct. Nowhere is the Church exhorted to conform to the surrounding culture. Rather, Christians are urged not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2).

Indeed, the New Testament stresses the contrast between the Church and the world: the Church is a 'called out' people, and Christians are 'sojourners and pilgrims' in the world (1 Peter 2:11). The calling of Christians is to live as lights in a dark world (Philippians 2:15), not to become absorbed by it. Jesus said that his disciples are not 'of this world'; therefore they can expect to attract its hostility (John 15:18-20; 17:14), and he solemnly warned them not to pursue popularity – 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you' (Luke 6:26).

The mission of the Church, then, is not to follow the world's lead, but to follow the teaching of its Head, as revealed in Scripture. That will include declaring 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27), upholding God's standards and calling men and women everywhere to repentance and new life in Christ.

The unity of the Church

Concern for the unity of the visible Church is always uppermost in the minds of participants in this debate. However, in the New Testament, unity is not presented as something that can be achieved

by structures or policies, but something to be *maintained*. Paul urges Christians to 'keep' or 'maintain' the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

True unity is something that God the Holy Spirit establishes between Christian believers – a unity 'of the Spirit'. It flows from union with the triune God – hence Jesus prays 'that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; *that they also may be one in us*, that the world may believe that you sent me' (John 17:21, emphasis added).

Jesus' prayer for the unity of his people follows on immediately from his prayer that they will be sanctified by means of God's Word of truth (John 17:17, 19). And it is by means of that same Word that new disciples are made (John 17:20). The unity of the Church is therefore inseparable from the Word of God. It is a unity in the truth.

The Church's calling is to adhere to the truth and stand united around the revelation that God has given in his Word. Just as some of Jesus' early followers found certain aspects of his teaching distasteful (e.g. John 6:60-67), so today there will be those who turn away. That is sad, but it is inevitable. But the Church must resist the temptation to adapt its message to make it more palatable. That was not how Jesus responded, and neither should we. The only unity that matters is the unity created by the Holy Spirit – a unity founded on the teaching of the Spirit-given Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Conclusion

Considered individually, the authority of Scripture, the nature of marriage, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the meaning of love, the mission of the Church and the unity of the Church point to the need for the Church to maintain its historic position on sexuality and family life. Considered together, they present a powerful testimony to the wisdom and love of God in his provision of an order and pattern for human relationships from creation. The calling of the Church is to testify to the divine plan and purpose both by teaching and example, and to shine as a light in a dark world, whatever the cost.

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